



# MIGHTY TO SAVE

CARYL  
McADOO

A Texas Romance  
Book Nine, 1919-1925

mighty  
to  
save



CARYL  
McADOO

This book is a work of fiction.

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## 5-Star **Mighty to Save** reviews

One of the best books I've read, with characters who've become friends in my mind. Right there all my senses [experienced] the country, the beatings, the tent revivals, the romantic moments along with all the heartache. So many tears, moments of praising and singing in the Spirit, along with thank you Jesus for hearing the cry of your children throughout this magnificent, powerful, heartfelt, sensational story. Caryl McAdoo is one gifted author with her lovable characters, multiple plots within this story, the power of God shining through along with laughter, tears, faith, heartbreak, determination, and never failing trust and love for our Heavenly Father. Oh how I cannot wait for the last book in her Texas Romance series, Chief of Sinners. **Mighty to Save** is going to be used for His glory.

– Marilyn Ridgway

Another great book by a great author! Opening the next book in the Texas Romance series is like coming home. My favorite characters come back to life. "**Mighty To Save**" was uplifting and the story really drew me in. It's a journey of faith for the characters, and their journey encouraged my journey. I highly recommend this book.

– Michele Beach

An outstanding addition to the series and example why Caryl McAdoo is one of my favorites. I was pulled into Evelyn and Nathaniel's story from the first. Wonderful characters, a story line that kept me reading,

and a beautiful story of how God works in His children.  
– Ann Ellison

Mighty to Save to be a pretty good read. It is a kind of read that plays on a reader's emotions. There are scenes of heartache and tears and, also, tender, romantic moments. Such a great beautiful story to show the joy of faith and redemption. I would recommend this book to those who love Christian Historical Fiction. I hope there will be a tenth book of the series in the future.

– Amy Campbell



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# All of Caryl's Books

## Historical Christian Texas Romances

*Vow Unbroken* – 1832 / *Hearts Stolen* – 1839-1844

*Hope Reborn* – 1850-51 / *Sins of the Mothers* – 1851-53 / *Daughters of the Heart* – 1853-54 / *Just Kin* – 1861-65 / *At Liberty to Love* – 1865-66 / *Covering Love* – 1885-86 / *Mighty to Save* 1918-1924

## Contemporary Christian

Red River Romances - *The Preacher's Faith* / *Sing a New Song* / *One and Done*

Apple Orchard Romances - *Lady Luck's a Loser*

## Biblical Fiction

The Generations - *A Little Lower Than the Angels* / *Then the Deluge Comes* / *Replenish the Earth* / *Children of Eber*

## Mid-Grade / Young Adult

River Bottom Ranch Stories - *The Adventures of Sergeant Socks: The Journey Home, bk 1* / *The Bravest Heart, bk 2* / *Amazing Graci, Guardian of the River Bottom Goats, bk 3*

Days of Dread Trilogy - *The King's Highway, bk 1*

## Miscellaneous Novels

*The Thief of Dreams* ~ **not written for the Christian market!** / *The Price Paid (based on WWII true story)* / *Absolute Pi* (audio; mystery) / *Apple Orchard B&B* (re-released as *Lady Luck's a Loser*)

## Non-fiction

*Great Firehouse Cooks of Texas* / *Antiquing in North Texas* / *Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction*

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;"  
Song of Solomon 2:12



## Dedication

How can I truly thank Him for all the things *my Father in Heaven* has done for me? So many underseved blessings He's showered on me to prove how very much He loves me are a daily amazement. Forever I will praise Him and give my all to bring Him glory.

I'm so blessed to have **RonMcAdoo** as my **husband!** I can relate to what Mary the mother of Yeshua when she said to Garbiel, "Blessed am I among women..." because Ron has such a heart after God and does his best to love me the way Christ loves the church. He's one more blessing from the Lord; after God, my everything, my heartbeat, my melody and harmony, the air I breathe. I love you beyond measure, Ron.

We've been married forty-nine years this June 22<sup>nd</sup>! Since we were eighteen years old in 1968! How much fun is that? I still have a love card he sent me the first year we were married that says he'll see eighty with me, how much he looked forward to growing old with me, so we have many more years to enjoy together!

This is also the first year, since we were nineteen years old and I gave birth to our first son Matthew in June, 1969, that we haven't had children in our home! Woo hoo! Empty-nesters! And loving my husband all the more!



## Acknowledgements

*You came into the world and died to set me free. You're all You said, the Word the Truth and Life to me. I couldn't live without Your grace, I'd be no more. But on Your everlasting Love, I can be sure! Chorus I'm Free!*

*I'm Free! Free to be what You want me to be! No more sin's slave! You freed me from the curse the day Your life You gave. You knew me then. You know me now, And love me still. The purpose of my life is now to do Your will!* (lyrics from a new song He gave me back in 1993 *I'm Free!*)  
I love You, Abba!

My sweetheart, Ron, and I attended the DFW Writers' Workshop fifteen years and learned our craft. He's a great writer—the reason I have such strong heroes and wonderful stories! Verbally giving me all his part, he's enabled me to call it mine for publishing purposes—plus we are one.

Our New York agent and Simon & Schuster editor both recommended only one name on the cover; we chose mine since he's more the big, strong, silent type—uncomfortable with touting our works to market, and I'm . . . well, you know!

I love you, Ron. I'm so blessed and glad that you are mine, and I am yours!

My thanks goes to Roseanne White for helping me with this cover that I just love, Lenda Selph for her excellent proofreading, Louise Koiner, Cassandra Wessel, and Marilyn Ridgway for editing help, too. Sharp eyes on my manuscripts are such a blessing! Thank y'all for your love and support.

Acknowledging my readers is a must. Y'all are the ones who enjoy the stories and tell your friends! Hugs for leaving all those wonderful reviews, clicking 'Share' and 'Like' and tweeting. May God bless you and give you favor for blessing me so big.

Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God.  
Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your  
masters with all fear; not only to the good and  
gentle, but also to the froward. For this is  
thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God  
endure grief, suffering wrongfully. I Peter  
2:17-19







# Chapter One

Short of the door, Evelyn paused. "Dear Lord, could she be a little bit better today? For sure and for certain, please don't let her die." Filling her lungs, she marched into the hospital room then stopped cold.

An elderly black woman sipped from a steaming porcelain cup. She sat next to a freshly made crisp, empty bed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am. I must have the wrong room."

The lady glanced over and smiled. "You Evelyn Nightingale, dear?"

How could she know her name?

"Why, yes, ma'am. I'm here to visit Miss Ann. Where is she? I hope she didn't . . ."

"Why, Ann Lacy's gone home, dear."

But . . . She'd had such faith. No doubt. She'd been so certain. Her heart sank. "Home . . . as in Heaven?"

"No, no, not at all, sugar. The world wouldn't be as bright without Ann Lacy Ellison in it. I mean home to her house." Setting her cup into its saucer, the lady extended her hand. "I'm Pearl, dear. Pearl Harris."

"Nice to meet you. What a blessing! She's home?"

"Well, it is my pleasure to meet you, Evelyn. I've heard so much about you, honey."

The sweet, faint fragrance of rosewater wafted with the woman's movement. She took the woman's offering in her left hand then covered it with her right. "So what happened, Miss Pearl? Miss Ann was still so sick just yesterday."

"A miracle, that's what." The elder lady laughed. "Why, that precious sister-in-the-Lord left this place healthy as a horse. Practically skipped out."

"Praise the Lord!"

"I can't do much these days, but I can still sit the sick of an evening. Me and Ann, we go way back. Been friends more than forty years, and she told me all about you praying for her and anointing those nasty ol' boils with oil."

"I couldn't imagine having something so horrible."

"Yes, ma'am, I hear you. Ann shared with me how you asked the Lord to heal her just like He did when Isaiah prayed for King Hezekiah."

"Yes, ma'am. It was my honor. And He gave me faith to believe He would heal her."

"Well, He sure did that! Dried up all those sores. All that poison—"

gone! Doc called it unorthodox. Far as I'm concerned, though, nothing short of a miracle."

A warmth swept over Evelyn then seeped deep into her soul. "Hallelujah! The Lord is mighty to save." Tears welled, ushering in a sob that about choked her. She sniffed, wiping her cheeks.

"Indeed."

"He's so good. Mercy! Miss Ellison was so sick and . . ." Evelyn laughed. "I thought . . . why me, Lord? It's Nathaniel—my husband's the Reverend Nightingale, you may have heard of him—anyway, He has the gift of healing, not me."

"Of course I've heard of him and all the wonderful miracles following his ministry."

With her chin tilted up and her eyes closed, she prayed. "Keep my beloved safe."

Miss Pearl's stirring opened her eyes. The lady stared into the windows of her soul. "Join me, please, Evelyn. I've a favor to ask."

Retrieving the room's other straight-backed visitor's chair, she set it across from her new friend. God was indeed good! "A favor? If I can, of course."

"It's my grandson, John Harris. He's serving in Captain Carpenter's 'A' Company. I'm hoping you'll agree to write your husband and ask him to look in on my boy some. John Robert—well, his mama was a Cambleite, and we Harrises always worshiped with the Methodist, but . . . denominations aside—"

"Cambleite?"

"Church of Christ, dear. You've never heard it called such?"

"No, ma'am." She grinned. She'd heard of the staunch beliefs of the Church of Christ folks but never heard them called that.

"Well, you see dear, I'm not sure about the well-being of John's soul. And with him being so far off . . . way over there in France and the war . . ."

"Consider it done, Miss Pearl. I'll write him this evening and post it tomorrow."

"Wonderful. That's simply wonderful. And Ann tells me you're May Meriwether's granddaughter, too? She must have been such a blessing to you growing up."

"Yes, ma'am. MayMee was a wonderful grandma; the only one I ever had, so I loved her extra special."

"She helped you write *Gray Lady Down*, didn't she?"

"Yes, ma'am. Well, she wrote the first half or more, and I helped her, then it ended up that I finished it after she passed on to glory."

"Well, I could not tell you where she stopped and you started for the life of me. Yes, ma'am. You've definitely got her way with words. Always thought my life would make an interesting story for folks to

read . . . how a slave girl became a queen.”

Of their own, Evelyn’s writer’s juices heightened and flowed with an innate interest. She smiled. “A queen?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. My Julius was a king, all right. That made me his queen. I started life as a slave. He was my young master, except he never treated me that way. Now, his granddaddy? That mean ol’ buzzard sold me off for spite.”

“Oh my.”

“ ’Course, he loved the gold, too. But he hated Julius treating me like a friend, that’s what it was all about.”

“How awful. How old were you when you got sold?”

“Fourteen—could have been fifteen. It was right before the war.”

Intriguing. Evelyn had four works in progress but wasn’t in love with any of them. Movement stopped her thoughts and pulled her attention toward the door.

A nurse stopped inside the room, grinning. “Isn’t it wonderful about Mis’ess Ellison? We were thinking maybe you might pray for some of our other patients.”

“Of course.” Evelyn stood then extended her hand. “Care to join me, Miss Pearl?”



Pearl prayed with the young lady for those who the nurse said requested a visit, but no miracles ensued, at least not any instant ones. Maybe by the next morning . . . like Ann . . . Poor Evelyn.

Apparent disappointment stole the sparkle from her eyes. Perhaps the girl’s regret even equaled her own. In the hall after the last supplicant, Pearl slipped her hand into Evelyn’s.

“Coffee? The café across the street makes a delicious buttermilk pie.”

She glanced at the big clock hanging in the hall then nodded. “Sure, I’ve still got time; and especially yes if you promise to tell me about getting sold. I can’t even begin to imagine such a horror.”

“I’d love nothing better. Truly was a horrible day.”

Took her half a piece of lemon meringue pie and two cups of black coffee to get to that heinous day, but to the dear girl’s credit, Evelyn didn’t try to rush the story, like most.

“So anyway, I’m helping boil the wash, stirring the clothes with a big paddle. That’s when old man Harris came around the big house with a rough-looking white trash of a man. Two giant slaves flanked him.”

“Oh dear.”

“My Julius was upstairs reading. I know, on account that’s what he always did until my chores were finished.” Pearl winked. “Plus he told me what happened that terrible day.”



A muffled scream wove itself into the Latin text that passed before Jules’ eyes. The Roman General, in his scarlet cloak, galloped into the breach.

A naked wail pulled him from the great man’s narrative. He rushed to the balcony’s rail, shielding his eyes from the sun’s brightness.

Two Negroes, both bigger than any his grandfather owned, dragged his Pearl toward a wagon full of manacled darkies.

He flew from his room and down the stairs. His mother stood in the doorway with her arms folded across her bosom. Her eyes, set hard as granite, stopped him cold.

“Get out of my way.”

“Go back to your room, Jules.”

Tears formed. She was worse than her father. Without another word, he pushed past her and sprinted toward the side yard.

His maternal grandfather and a man he’d never seen before stood by the wagon’s team and chatted while the larger of the Negroes lifted his love toward the waiting hands of a catcher in the wagon.

She kicked and struggled like he’d never seen her fight.

Fifteen paces from his goal, the old man turned toward him. “Jules, no.” He held up a hand as if that’d be ample to stop him. Jules swerved out of his reach and launched himself toward Pearl’s abductor.

His shoulder caught the giant in the back and knocked him against the sideboard. The man dropped her, and she scrambled under the wagon. Jules righted himself, raised both fists, then faced his grandfather.

No one moved.

The old man pulled out his pocket watch and studied it a moment. “Well, boy, you’ve got more spunk than I figured, but you’re a fool if you think you can keep me from selling that nigger.”

Maybe he was a fool, but what did it matter? He loved her, loved her with everything in him. Right or wrong, whatever anyone said, he loved her. “Then sell her to me. I’ve got money.”

A haughty chuckle boiled Jules' blood.

"No, boy, I own you and the few dollars your worthless pappy left. Now quit your foolishness and get back to the house."

The tears returned and trickled down his cheeks. "You best kill me then. I'll not let her go." He moved his fists in tight, daring circles.

His grandfather threw a nod over Jules' shoulder. Vice-like hands grabbed him from above, lifted him into the wagon, then pinned both his arms with a bear hug.

Quick as a cat, the giant dropped to one knee and pulled Pearl from under the buckboard. Amidst her wails, he yanked her around to the back of the wagon.

Jules stomped the heel of his boot onto the bare foot of the black man holding him, then wiggled a hand free. He spun around and flailed at his holder.

The field hands already in the wagon shied back.

Their chains clanged against the wooden floorboard. Ignoring what had to be broken bones in his foot, the slave trader's man grabbed his hand mid-air then turned him toward the back of the wagon.

"She be bought and paid for. Ussins aim to take her, so best stop your fighting 'fore I's hurts ya."

The words—whispered into Jules' ear—chilled him to the bone. Not because he feared the man, but because he spoke the truth.

Pearl swung her outstretched arms and legs wildly and screamed like she'd been burnt with a whiskey rod, but the giant chained each ankle as though her blows and bellowing were an everyday affair.

The man holding Jules picked him up then jumped off the wagon. He landed on his feet like he did that every day, too, and twice on Sundays.

Then without word or warning, he rolled Jules to the ground face down and held him there with his bare foot.

"Don't you dare hurt him," Jules' mother yelled.

Pearl's wails turned to resigned sobs. The old man's leather sole replaced the barefoot and pressed hard against Jules' back. Too soon, wood creaked and leather slapped horse hide. He raised his head as much as he could.

The wagon pulled away with Pearl flanked by field hands and house servants.

She strained against her shackles and held out her arms. "Save me, Jules!"

Oh, Pearl. His sweet Pearl. He pushed against the weight on his back.

"Hold still, boy." The old man's voice held no compassion.

"Let me up." Jules struggled more and pushed harder, but the

pressure only increased. Rustling petticoats grew nearer, then his mother's small hands on his cheek drained some of his fight.

"For goodness sake, let him up, Father."

The boot lifted. Jules struggled to his knees. She wrapped her arms around his shoulder and bent to his ear. "Don't do anything stupid, Son. That girl is not worth it."

He glared. "Not worth it? How can you say that? Pearl's worth everything to me. I love her, Mother."

She reeled back, obviously cut by his words. "Good heavens above, Son. Don't you ever say a thing like that! Why . . . Why . . . you couldn't. You can't. Even though her skin is light, she's still just a Nigra." She moved toward him, but Jules stood and stepped backward.

"Son, you're only seventeen. I know you've known little Pearl long as you can remember, and it's wholly understandable to . . . to . . . care for her. Yes, you may certainly care for the girl. There's nothing wrong with caring. Why, for instance, take my Pal."

"Your dog?"

"Yes. I cared so very much for that beautiful collie that when he died, I thought I would cry myself dry. But love? Son, you don't know what that is."

How could Jules respond? How could she compare Pearl to a dog? She was the one who didn't know about love. Only married his father for his cattle to save the plantation and keep it in the family.

The old man, now surrounded by his overseer and a trio of Live Oaks' field hands, shook his head. "Enough of this nonsense, boy. Get to your room 'fore we put you there."

The wagon made the corner at the bottom of the hill where the big house sat. Jules could barely make out her ivory skin in the sea of ebony.

At least there seemed no further struggle. She must be so scared, but smart enough to have realized, there was nothing more to do. At least for the moment.

"Curse you, old man. If my father was still alive—"

The back of his grandfather's hand smashed into Jules' mouth. He reeled.

"Well, he ain't, and you will do what I say. Now get to your room and stay there."

Jules' fists clinched, but a physical contest with the heartless brute, even if he got in the first lick, would be like a fight between a mountain lion and a house cat. He stepped away then turned and ran to his room like a whipped piccaninny.





Evelyn waited for more of the story, but the old woman looked off like she had lost herself in her past. “Miss Pearl?”

The ex-slave focused then smiled. “Where was I?”

“For sure and for certain, I want to hear the rest of this story. And I’d love to write it—if you’ll let me, that is. But I’ve got to go right now. When can we get together again?”

The lady’s lips spread wide, erasing half the wrinkles of her cream-colored skin. “Child, I’d love nothing better than to see my and Jules’ story in print. Let’s visit next when it’s best for you. Other than sitting with the sick, I’m free.”

She stood and extended her hand. “Tomorrow then. Is noon good? We can talk over dinner—my treat.”

“Yes, ma’am. Noon it is.”

Evelyn paid the check then hurried out. Bless the Lord! What a well-named gem the Lord sent her in Miss Pearl.

Could tomorrow come soon enough?



# Chapter Two

Like her grandmother before her, Evelyn had a flair for the dramatic. Thus, she saved her news until the end. The last of her clutch fell silent. The ladies looked around the circle, one to another.

No one seemed compelled to share any more testimonies or prayer requests.

"Excellent." She filled her lungs. Still, no one spoke. "We're all set as to where each of us will be ministering and what our objectives are?" She let her question float, but obviously, no one needed more direction. "Very good."

Standing, she held her hands out, palms down. The few ladies who'd also risen sat back in their chairs.

"There's one more thing. Apparently, the board of directors at the charity my family founded likes the idea of chaplains' wives living together under one roof to spread the Gospel and generally uplift our community while we wait for our husbands to return."

Helen, the second-ranking wife, sat a little straighter. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"Yesterday evening, the postman brought good tidings. Very good tidings. The charity's treasurer sent a check, with the promise of one per month for the duration of our stay at the Caswell House. God is so good. Ladies, our room and board will be completely taken care of until this horrible war is over."

Two of the junior officers' wives squealed, the others made happy talk with the one sitting next to them or across the circle. A few praise-the-Lords echoed off the parlor's walls. Leaning over, she caught her son's eye. "Buddy, would you like to pray to close this morning's meeting?"

"Yes, ma'am." The boy jumped to his feet with more grace and dexterity than most four-year-olds possessed. Nary a block of the fort he'd been building overturned.

Once in the circle's middle, the cotton-top steepled his hands and looked at the ceiling.

"Lord, make our soldiers real brave and help them shoot straight. And make them Gerry guys turn tail and run. Don't let them shoot good at all. Bring our daddies home real quick. Maybe even tomorrow, or next week for sure and for certain."

The boy threw his head exactly like his father always did when he prayed.

A smattering of amens sounded, but her son evidently wasn't finished. He belted out his own amen in song, a pure tenor that belied

his years. Bless the Lord, the little fellow hadn't fallen far from her tree. The last noted faded.

"Thank you, dear heart."

Her son ran to her and launched himself a few feet short. She caught him in the air and let the momentum lift him high then back into her arms. She kissed his neck. "You my good man?"

"Yes, ma'am! Can we go see the trains today? Please, Mama."

"I'm sorry, not today, I have to meet a lady and you're staying with Miss Helen and the other children."

The boy grinned. "Maybe tomorrow when Daddy comes home."

She only smiled, knowing full well the child was smart enough to know it would be more days than he could count. But he preferred thinking in terms of tomorrow—or next week—for that wonderful homecoming reunion to occur.

The morning already grew warm under the Texas June sun. Too warm for Evelyn's taste. She spread her parasol and picked up her pace, arriving at the café ahead of the elder lady but not by much.

The small talk over the delicious blue plate specials intrigued her. Afterward, tummy full, she still hungered . . . for more of Pearl's story.

Between sips of black coffee and nibbles of buttermilk pie, she finally steered her new friend toward her history and its telling.

Not that Miss Pearl needed much prodding soon as she got it underway.

"Yes, ma'am, 'twas a horrible time to be sure. My Jules? He stayed in his room that whole livelong day. Told me all about it."



For hours, Jules paced and brooded. His mother tried to coax him down for supper, but food held no interest. His walking back and forth continued, pondering his next course of action. He had to do something.

Of that, he was certain, but little else.

What would his namesake do?

Searching his mind of the emperor's writings, he found no clear answer; nothing to soothe his soul or point him in any direction. He didn't even know where they took her. Or the slave trader's name.

Why had he acted so stupidly?

Caesar would never have rushed in and made such a fool of himself, flailing against Quixote's windmills.

Head hanging until his chin rested on his chest, Jules chided himself again—what a disgrace to the great man he'd turned out to

be. With no intention of quitting before he had a solution of some sort, he continued pacing.

Half an hour past lights out, his door creaked open.

Someone tiptoed a few feet into his darkened room. "Masser Jules?" She paused in the ebony silence. "You in here, sir?"

"That you, Pretty?"

"Yessuh, it be me."

"What do you want, girl?"

She turned toward him. "There you is. It be black as midnight in here." Her nervous giggle irritated him. "Masser Carter done sent me. He say I be your new bedwarmer."

"He . . . what? Who does he think . . . I can warm my own bed. You get on back to your mammy."

"Please don' make me leave. Masser'll whup me good iff'n I don' stay. Let me climb on in down to the foot. I won't bother you none."

"Why do you say you would be whipped?"

"On account what he say. It be for me to helps you forget all about him sending Pearl off to Galveston."

Jules' heart leaped. He eased toward the door, leading to the balcony, flung back the heavy drapes, and wiggled his finger in the moon's light for her to follow.

Once he reached the terrace's furthest corner, he turned. In the silver glow, Pretty stood not six inches in front of him. The girl took his request seriously.

Palm outstretched facing down, he motioned her to sit at his feet, knelt down, then whispered, "Galveston, you say? Tell me how you know where they took Pearl. And be quiet about it."

"Big Cy? He Masser Holace's main mule skinner. He done tol' Mammy all about it. They goes all over the state gathering darkies for this big sale in Galveston."

"Holace who?"

She shrugged. "Just Masser Holace. That be all Pretty heard."

He nodded. "You get on up into my bed and be quiet."

Searching the night sky, he found Pearl's and his star. Did she gaze on it, too? When the slave's breathing finally slowed, quiet as he could, he gathered what he would need for the trip. Though he had no specific plan formulated yet how to get Pearl back, he would.

One way or another, he'd find her in Galveston and liberate her. Then he'd settle with his mother—and her worthless father.



Eight miles east of the only home Pearl had ever known, she, too, found the same star and gazed on it with a broken heart hurting her chest bad.

If only she should wake snuggled against her Jules, wake from the day's nightmare of being separated from her love, sold and sent off to who knew where.

There'd been talk of an auction.

Why couldn't everything only be as the day before? Yesterday, she loved.

Vision blurred by tears, she looked away from the twinkling light.

Nothing could ever be the same.

She wadded a corner of the thin blanket Big Cy gave her a little tighter under her chin then leaned back into the wagon wheel they'd chained her to. Not conducive for her escape.

The knuckleheads—as the giant called them—snored or whistled in their sleep above her.

If only she could find such blissful slumber to take her away to that place where nothing mattered. But she needed to study on escape—because that's what she had to do—even though shackled like a dog.

Sleep would allow her to leave her new world where everything was lost.

She'd never see Jules again, Live Oaks where she'd lived most her life, or any of her people. And the whole of it rested on her shoulders. Her fault. Why had she let Janey talk her into writing that pass?

How imprudent not to play out every scenario, and realize the young woman could not be trusted.

She never dreamed, though . . .

"If I be caught . . ." Pearl could still hear the girl as though swearing on the Good Book. "I will never tell. Let them whip me bloody; I keep my lips shut tight as Masser's fist on two bits. I have to see my babies, friend."

But she'd never made it as far as the neighboring plantation.

And she did tell. Humph.

All it took for that traitor to spill the truth of the whole story was Mister Hightower showing her the whip. Never took one lick. The why of her own stupidity dogged Pearl worse than the knuckleheads' night songs.

Again and again, she chastised herself. Why this and why that with as many how-could-shes plagued her.

Deep into that most lonely of nights, she cried a bucket of tears.

Wet drops cascaded silently over her cheeks. Her heart ached. She hugged herself and rocked, trying to think of what she could do. She

needed a plan. Then, from behind, a hand covered her mouth.

Sweaty man stench filled her nostrils.

“Don’t you make a peep.” The man wrapped his other arm around her waist and pulled her under the wagon.

Kicking and twisting failed to free her. She sunk her teeth into his meaty fingers and pushed his hands with all her might. The one over her mouth loosened. She screamed for help.

Whop. Her face jerked to the side.

Tiny sparkling fireflies circled her head, and her cheek burned. She blinked her eyes clear. She tried to bite his hand again, but couldn’t sink her teeth. Her jaw hurt too bad. She hated him. Hated everything about her new life.

Oh, Lord, help me.

Then as if God Himself waited only for her to ask, something or someone pulled the man from under the wagon. The muleskinner dragged her along by his grip on her shirt. Her chain stretched taunt, then she stopped with a jolt.

The man kept going, still holding on. Her attacker ripped the material before he let go.

Cy or some other giant angel lifted her assailant and flung him over his huge shoulder like a sack of taters. Her foe flailed at the bigger man, but to no more avail than a child trying to stop his papa from taking him to the woodshed.

Pearl gathered herself, scooted back to her wheel, then burst into sobs.

Callused fingers patted her cheek. “Don’t cry, Missy. One sweet morn, we’ll fly away.” She blinked back fresh tears and looked up.

A knucklehead peered over the wagon’s sideboard and nodded his nappy head. “Yes, ma’am. The Lord ain’t forgot us. He be sending our deliverer most any day now.”

She attempted a smile, but her mouth refused. Not only was there nothing to smile about, but her cheek might likely break if she tried. It throbbed and stung like a million bee stings.

Just because Cy saved her that time didn’t mean he’d be there the next.

What was she going to do? What could she do?

Oh, Lord, have mercy on me.





# Chapter Three

The sweet old lady closed her eyes and bowed her head. Her lips moved but with no sound. Evelyn could barely imagine going through such a horror, but certainly understood the need for prayer.

Praise God she'd never experienced such circumstances. How could a person treat another human being with so little regard because of their skin color?

All that her pawpaw had done to help Negroes—how he'd bought and set as many free as possible—came to mind. And she prayed, too, thanking God for her heritage with a grandfather like Henry Buckmeyer.

Miss Pearl looked up. "That man. They called him Buck. He was a bad man; of the worst kind. I heard after the war, he got himself hung. Most likely he deserved it, but . . ."

"Mercy."

She wiped her cheeks. "Struggled for the longest with forgiving him. Finally did, though, only with God's help. I even prayed for him." The old lady smiled. "Yes, ma'am. God is good."

"Oh, dear Miss Pearl, He surely is. And I'm so sorry."

"Yes, indeed, but still . . ." The old lady looked around then leaned in a bit. "Jules and I shared his bed for years, but he never—you know—not until we married."

"Very commendable, considering how much he loved you."

"Oh, yes. Now he was a man of the best kind, especially taking into account him not being a believer all that time. But I think that's why the Lord protected me then, and . . ." Miss Pearl seemed to get lost in her remembrance then grinned.

"Did you ever get to the auction?"

"Oh, I got sold alright, but . . . Well, before I tell that part, let me catch you up on Jules."



After a long night of preparation and planning, that September morning broke tepid and still, as it's wont to do in the Texas Hill Country. While Pretty fetched his tray, Jules sat on the balcony and watched Live Oaks come alive.

The normal routine—breakfast there with Pearl filling him in on

all the goings-on in the quarters and morning activities—usually held his interest, but the day dawned lusterless and empty.

Only one thing interested him. The old man leaving.

The groom had already brought his grandfather's gelding to the front steps, but there had been no sign of the heartless Carter G. Hightower. No wonder his mother's compassion proved stunted with such a man for a father.

Hating the man, he swore to himself then and there he'd never be like him.

Every morning without exception, Mister High-and-Mighty mounted his steed and rode out to survey his vast holdings. It sickened Jules that his father got insults, instead of credit, for saving the place.

If only he'd lived, things would have been so different. Jules put that thought away.

Getting sidetracked wouldn't save Pearl, and if he didn't plan everything exactly right, he'd never make it to Austin, much less all the way to Galveston.

His door opened, and Pretty backed in carrying a loaded tray. The tantalizing smell of fried bacon and aroma of fresh baked biscuits reminded him of yesterday's fast.

"You be eating out there, Masser?"

Jules resisted the urge to correct her English. "Yes, please."

He paid her no mind while she busied herself spreading the table, arranging the plates and silverware.

Thunder, the old man's steel gray gelding, held his attention until she stood back. He still ignored her, but not so much that he missed a pouting bottom lip.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Don't mean to cast my worries on you none, Masser Jules." She wrung her hands. "I be 'fraid I's going to be whipped."

Grabbing a biscuit, he buttered it then leaned back. She squirmed under his scrutiny. "Why, pray tell, would you get the strap? Have you done something wrong?"

She nodded.

"What? Tell me true."

She swallowed, sank to her knees, then whispered in perfect English. "Please take me with you when you go."

His gut tightened, but he forced a snicker. "What are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere, except maybe for a ride later this morning, and I prefer to leave alone."

"I hate it here." She glanced around. "I can't stand getting whipped."

"Who's been taking a strap to you?"

Her eyes flashed then she ducked them, staring at the floorboards.

“Your grandpap.” Though barely audible, her accusation rang true.

Jules lifted her chin and studied the windows of her soul. “Why has he been strapping you?”

Tears welled. “Don’t take nothing much. I swears he likes it. I tries so hard not to cross him none, but hardly a full moon shines again afore he finds his reason.”

Jules believed every word. Why hadn’t Pearl said something? She must have known, unless . . . “How come you never told anyone?”

Like his question was a sharp knife with nasty barbs, she shied back. Shifting her weight, she looked him dead on.

With a deep full breath, she filled her lungs then stiffened her back. “Makes me bite on a piece of hickory while he’s beating me. After he’s done, he’s always real nice.”

“The man’s never nice.”

In agreement, she nodded repeatedly. “While he sees to my backside with liniment, he goes on about it being all my fault. Says if I tells, he’ll hear about it and whip me twice as hard.”

Staring a moment, she crisscrossed her hands and grabbed the hem of her blouse on both sides. As she turned, she lifted the cotton. Thick scars corded her flesh, so thick, Jules could barely make out the girl’s backbone.

The sight sickened him.

How could his blood kin do such a thing? She dropped the blouse, spun around, and pled with her eyes.

What could he say in the face of such cruelty? She fell sobbing at his feet. “Please take me with you.”

How could she possibly know anything? She slept sound before he ever snuck out. A thousand scenarios flashed through his mind. Her plight changed nothing. He couldn’t possibly let her go.

Wouldn’t have a chance, dragging a slave along.

“Why are you carrying on so? What’ve you done?”

When she looked up, the white showed all the way around her ink-black eyes, and her tear-wet cheeks glistened in the morning sun.

“Because I didn’t tell about you leaving. He said to come tell him right away if you were even thinking about lighting out. But I didn’t. Not a word.” She blinked against the sun then shaded her eyes with her hand. “You’ll take me, won’t you? Please?”

A spy! The old man sent her to spy. How dare him! Jules looked again. The gelding pawed the ground. Anger toward his grandfather stretched to include the pitiful girl at his feet. “Why do you think I’m leaving?”

She wiped fresh tears from her cheek but didn’t look up. “Harley.”

“What about him?”

“He seen you stashing a bag in the horse apple tree last night and

told Mammy. She says I best go with you, or I might get beat to death. She had Harley stow more traveling victuals, enough for two. Please don't leave me behind. I'll be good. I'll cook for you and see to you. Won't be no trouble."

"But—"

"Please, sir, I promise."

Heavens above. Seemed everyone on the place knew.

Right then, the old man came out, bellowing orders, and mounted the gray. He reined the horse around then stared right up at Jules who stared back.

His lips thinned into a smirk as he tipped his hat then spurred Thunder south. Jules watched until he disappeared, then faced Pretty.

"Can you ride a horse?"



"Pearl?"

A finger poked her shoulder. She opened her eyes. "What?"

"You awake?"

"Yes." She scooted from beneath the wagon seat.

How'd she gotten there? The stench from the back of the wagon forced her around. Cy had stopped under a big willow, a few yards short of a live creek. Holace and Buck were nowhere to be seen.

"Where are we?"

"Little more than a stone's throw outta Austin."

The sun's position indicated morning was near over.

"Why'd we stop?"

He jumped off and reached under the wagon. "Masser Holace, he wants everyone to clean up some before we get to town."

"Those in the back smell like polecats."

Working the key, he pulled her chain through the hole in the floor board. "Don't have the one for your ankle. You'll have to carry your chain." He held up his hands.

She stepped on the sideboard. Without noticeable effort, he caught her under the arms, lifted, then set her feet on the ground.

"You got plenty of time afore I get these stinking knuckleheads to water." He handed her a clean dress and a bar of soap. "Go on upstream. I'll take them down the other way apiece."

"What if I run?"

He smiled. "Wouldn't get far, lugging ten pound of chain."

"But if I did? What'd happen to you?"

"Get your bath and quit that thinking about running."

She took a step then turned back. "Would he whip you bad?"

“No.” He waved her toward the creek. “He’d spank you pretty good though once I tracked you down.”

Running preyed hard on her mind as she waded knee-deep into the warm stream. It felt good on her feet.

If only she knew more about that underground railroad everyone in the quarters rode in their dreams. Or if she had the first clue how to live off the land as they claimed a body could do on the way North.

Only she didn’t want to go north. All she wanted was to return to Live Oaks and be reunited with Jules. But she could never go back, not as long as Mister Hightower drew breath.

“Oh, Lord, is it proper to hate an evil man and wish him dead?”

No answer came from Heaven.

Before she decided, the creek widened at a sharp bend and appeared to deepen. She glanced over her shoulder. The willows and wild grapevines would shield her there. She trudged back onto shore, draped the clean dress over a bush.

At the deepest point, the water came up almost to her shoulders, and she pulled off the soiled one.

Two good lathers and a thorough hair scrubbing brought no clarity. She still hadn’t made any decisions over whether wishing Carter Hightower dead would bring curses on her own self.

Should she take her chances and run?

Before she finished soaping her old dress, water splashing farther upstream put her under up to her chin. She slipped toward the opposite bank.

A cowboy, riding a dun mare, rounded the bend. She pinched her nose and went down to eye level. As he drew closer, the horse whinnied and shied away.

Lean and wiry built, the man patted the mare quiet then searched the shadows. His gaze studied the dress on the bush too long. Then he scanned the water more carefully. His gaze stopped right on her.

Aching lungs forced her head up.

“Well, now. A man goes looking for strays and finds himself a runaway. Stand up, girl.”

She held the soiled dress in front of herself and stood. “I’m no runaway.” She remembered herself, ducked her eyes, then spoke in her best slave, “Masser’s wagon’s right yonder.” She pointed over her shoulder.

He rode to the far bank, dismounted, yanked off his boots, then waded into the shallows. He didn’t smell any better than the knuckleheads.

“You sure are pretty for a nigger.” The filthy beast unbuckled his chaps, threw them to shore, then took to unbuttoning his britches. “I think I best teach you a lesson about running.”

She clutched the dress tighter and backed downstream. "Please mister, Masser'll be real mad with you. I ain't no runaway."

"I don't think so." He sloshed toward her. "Naw. I think he'll be real happy when I bring you back."

The cowboy closed to within ten feet. She grabbed the chain, threw the dress at him and dove. Her free hand hit the sandy bottom and stopped her cold.

Before she could scramble to her feet, he grabbed an ankle. She fought her way to air then flailed and screamed to the heavens.

"Hold still, girl. I ain't going to hurt you." He grabbed a handful of hair and yanked.

The pain hushed her.

He studied her with evil eyes. "Look at that pretty little nose of yours. Your daddy was a white man, wasn't he? Straw boss? Or was he the master?"

"Please, mister. I dunno. Jes let Pearl go, and I'll skedaddle back where I's belong. Please."

A gun boomed. Leaves and little branches peppered the creek. "Let her go."

The cowboy turned, and she moved as far away as his hold on her hair allowed. Cy stood in the creek about twenty feet downstream, resting the shotgun in the crook of his arm. Little whiffs of smoke trailed out its barrel.

"Well, I'll be. If it ain't another runaway." The cowboy stood. "Best put that scatter gun away 'fore you get hurt, boy."

"Let her go before you get shot." Cy never took his eyes off the man's. "You ailing, girl?"

"No, Cy." Thank God he came.

The cowboy let go of her hair, and she scrambled toward the bank, but he caught her wrist.

"Tell you what, boy. You leave now, and I'll forget about you pulling a gun on a white man."

Cy swung the weapon around. "I say leave her be."

"Or what?"

"I'll blow your cracker head off, that's what." He stepped forward with the barrel raised and his finger on the trigger.

The cowboy glanced at Pearl then back to the scatter gun. For a moment, he froze like he was thinking about a charge. Instead, he let her arm go and stepped back. She ran and hid behind her savior.

"You'll pay for this, nigger."

Cy nodded. "Maybe, maybe not. You best git."

Pearl stayed behind the giant's leg until the man gathered his belongings and disappeared.

When the sound of his mare sloshing through the creek died, Cy

turned his back. “Get your clothes on afore them knuckleheads try something stupid.”

Feeling with her feet, she found the wet dress, wrung it good then slipped over to the bush and dressed, her heart still keeping time with the red-headed woodpecker in a yonder tree.

Faster than she thought possible, Cy loaded the wagon and headed out. She scooted under the seat and touched her protector’s leg. “Were you really going to shoot that cowboy?”

He laughed from deep inside. "Sho' 'nuff, I would. Then I'd of skinned him and cooked him up in the stew for supper."



“Mercy, dear one. The Lord certainly is mighty to save.” Evelyn reached across the table and took the old lady’s wrinkled hand.

“Twice in two days. Cy was heaven sent for sure and for certain.”

“Indeed, but he . . . well, wait just a minute. I’d be getting ahead of the story if I told you that part now, best get back to Jules. I hated hearing him tell it.”

“Why? What happened?”

“No what, but who. You see . . .” Both of Miss Pearl’s shoulders scrunched a bit then she smiled, except something pained the grin. Was jealousy lurking in those old eyes?

For longer than she had planned on staying, Evelyn listened to the ex-slave spin her yarn, except it had to be true. No one would make up what had happened to Pearl and Jules, and it certainly would make a great novel.

The tale definitely kept her on the edge of her seat, wanting to hear more.

Full of coffee and pie, with her head overflowing with her new novel—unlike most of her other books, she’d already had settled on a name, *Pearl of Great Price*. She loved it.

Hopefully, her editor would, too. She hated it to blue blazes and back that she didn’t have final say on her books’ titles.

One fine day, she’d be as famous as her MayMee, and they’d not dare change one jot or tittle of her work.

On her walk alone back to the Casswell House, she chided herself for being so prideful. She didn’t want destruction to befall her and any of hers, but that’s exactly what would happen if she didn’t find some humility.

Supper, dishes, then visiting in the parlor while the children

played filled her evening with all the expected niceties.

However, her Underwood typewriter beckoned—already loaded with two shiny white pieces of paper with a nice new black sheet of carbon paper between them. She could hardly wait to get the story started.

Never mind the pen and inkwell she used to correspond with her beloved.

Only took half a chapter and two verses of *Sleepytown* to send Buddy off to God's gift to mothers. So handsome when he slept . . . and sweet. She grinned.

Then it was the best of times. If only Nathaniel sat his chair, reading her latest offering while she pounded the keys on the next page. Then it would be perfect.

Soon she lost herself in *Pearl* and the telling of the story, only coming up for breath with the completion of each page. Praise the Lord she'd laid in a goodly supply of ribbon, paper—both white and carbon—and Coca-Cola.

How could she write without copious amounts of the caffeinated elixir?

Two full chapters! What a night. She separated the last page, put the copy in Nathaniel's stack then retrieved her feather. She tickled her chin, dipped its quill, and went to work on finishing his missive.

Such a wonderful word—missive. So much more fun than the mere letter. She'd loved the word forever.

With more to say, the big clock in the parlor chimed twice, warning of burning tomorrow's day. She found a stopping point and signed off then slipped into bed next to her son.

Unlike his father, Buddy would not let her sleep late. And if she could find a few winks, she might just get in a solid four hours before he woke.



Exactly ten days, nine hours and sixteen minutes later, Captain Nathaniel Nightingale, finally alone in his room, opened the thick manila envelope.

Her letters sustained him. He loved them, had since she was six years old . . . forever, a lifetime. They drew him into her world, and he loved being there more than anywhere else.

Lots of good news filled her missive. Maybe the best of all was that she'd started a new novel. She might even finish that one. A fat advance check would sure help him spread the Gospel.



Of late her royalty checks had gotten a bit thin.

He shook out the two chapters she'd enclosed and turned the oil lamp's wick a bit higher. The carbon copy wasn't quite as dark as her pen and ink letter.

Some fine day, he'd give them all back to her . . . once he knew the day of his death. Until then, they were his most prized of possessions.

After the first two paragraphs, the words literally danced off the page.

What a story!

He needed more.

Why would she torture him like that?



# Chapter Four

“Father, I know the Word says there’s a time for war, but Lord, the dead are piled up like cordwood. Please, Father, end the madness.”

Tears threatened, but the reality of tending to the spiritual needs of the living pulled Nathaniel off his knees. Stiff joints paid the price, a small one considering the strength his hour of prayer brought each morning.

He dressed quickly then hurried to the mess hall. One glorious day, he’d drink his wife’s coffee again, but until, he’d make do with the muddy mixture the Army cooks served—bless their peace-loving hearts.

Alone in the corner, as his habit had been since his arrival, he sipped and prayed and waited for those who’d be seeking the solace he offered.

What a privilege to serve on these fields. His harvest definitely proved ripe. He’d led so many to God’s sweet gift.

Quicker than most days, the first doughboy slipped in across from him. “Reverend, sir, I uh . . . We’re heading back later today, and oh . . .”

“You saved, Son?”

“I don’t know, but . . .” He glanced around then leaned in closer. “Dreamed last night I took one right between the eyes. Saw myself—like from above—sprawled out in no man’s land deader than a doornail.”

“That’s a common nightmare, Son, and we’ll address that, but let’s get back to the condition of your soul. How is it you don’t know if you’re saved or not? Why aren’t you sure of it? Don’t you want to be?”

“Guess so, sir.” The man shrugged then shook his head. “I was baptized back when I was thirteen, but . . . well . . . haven’t darkened too many church doors in years.”

“Church is important, but sitting in a stall all day doesn’t make you a horse. Attendance doesn’t always mean a body is saved.”

“Well, just don’t suppose God really wants anything to do with me anymore. I’ve . . .” The soldier’s eyes gazed off as though searching some distant place where his sins piled high.

“God’s Word says all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved—not some. Not a few. All. Jesus clearly stated He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no man comes to the Father except through Him.”

The man nodded.

“Talk to the Lord. Confess your sins. Ask Him to watch over you

and—”

A chill stopped Nathaniel cold. His pulse quickened, then a word of wisdom dropped into his soul.

“Killing the enemy will not damn your soul to hell, Son.”

The man recoiled. “All respect due, sir, but I’ve killed so many. And I know enough to know that killing is one of the big ones.”

“No, though so many think so, that is not one of the Ten Commandments. Not exactly. What it really says is, ‘thou shall not murder.’ Taking the enemy’s life is not on you, but on those who started this madness.”

“That so?”

“Now, if you shot an unarmed prisoner—it’d be murder. But even that is forgivable. There’s no sin so great that God’s love can’t cover it.”

“You sure about that?”

“Absolutely, Son. Positive. If you go back to the original Hebrew, it definitely says murder, and there is a difference in that and killing.”

“And He’ll forgive me all those years I haven’t . . .” The man exhaled. “Wow, I never thought . . . Thank you, sir.” He glanced at the line that had formed.

“Would you like to pray with me?”

“Sure.”

Leading through a prayer of confession and repentance, Nathaniel thanked Father God for sending angels to protect the young man. He counted the fellow as a rededication, sensing his earlier salvation was true indeed.

“I appreciate you, sir. I feel so much better.”

Nathaniel tipped over the small vial with his finger on its top then daubed a bit of oil onto his parishioner’s forehead. “Be blessed, and go with God.”

The morning proved fruitful, but then so many of his congregants would be heading off for the killing fields that day.

Only the most hardened of souls refused to seek any kind of reconciliation with the Creator in such a day and time; difficult to understand why anyone wouldn’t.

He continued to pray. Looking around the large tent, he picked out those very ones to spend a few extra words over.

Once the trucks pulled out, he headed toward the hospital. Maybe the Lord would see fit to allow him to lay hands on a few of the mangled and maimed.

If only he had enough faith—even the size of a mustard seed. Short of the tent’s door, a soldier intercepted him.

“Chaplain, sir, Major Carpenter would like an audience.”

He followed the man to the division’s headquarters. The man

Nathaniel considered to have the hardest heart of all stood as the minion ushered him into the office.

“Chaplain. Good news.”

“They called the war off?”

“Afraid not, but until they do, here.” He tossed a small box toward him. “After he pinned mine on, the Colonel asked me to give you your gold leaves.”

What? Nathaniel opened the box.

Praise the Lord; Evelyn’s allotment would increase. He looked up. “Congratulations, Major Carpenter, on your promotion.”

“Thank you, Major—or rather, Chaplain. Anything I can help you with?”

“Sir, do you know a John Harris?”

“I do. Sergeant Harris is a good man. Why the inquiry?”

“His grandmother has asked my wife to have me look in on him, pray for him.”

Carpenter nodded. “He’s off in England now. Due back day after tomorrow though.”

Well, that didn’t make any sense. Nathaniel never heard of anyone getting a trip across the channel. His surprise must have registered.

“Learning how to maneuver the Mark V.”

How he hated hearing that piece of news. Tank drivers didn’t last long.

“So. The rumors about the big push . . . are true.”

“General Pershing was in Chaumont last I heard. Might want to ask the old man about that sort of scuttlebutt.”

For the second time that morning, a Holy Ghost chill washed over Nathaniel. Glory bumps rose on his extremities. For sure and for certain, the Allies were about to break out and . . . Truth cut him.

A terrible vision of the carnage unfolded before his inner eye. “Oh, dear Lord, have mercy on us all.”

“Just now, Nightingale. What happened? What did you do?”

“Nothing, sir, not me. The Lord. He showed me what’s about to take place, and . . .” Shaking his head as if he could toss away the knowing, Nathaniel backed a step.

“Oh, the Lord, huh?” His superior’s mocking tone touched his heart deeply.

“Major, sir, you best get right with God. What’s coming is terrible. This war will kill seventeen million men, women, and children before it’s all over.”

Carpenter waved him away. “See to your own soul, Reverend, leave mine to me.”

“I can’t do that, sir. I’ll be praying for you.” He turned and marched out.



Later that evening, at the Black Bear Inn and Pub, Sergeant John Harris scrutinized the crowded room, too keenly aware that on the morrow's morrow, he'd have to leave England and return to the front.

That prospect alone troubled him enough, but never seeing Emily again almost had him on the edge of desertion. Not that he ever really could. He had a purpose—to help make the world safe for democracy. But . . .

The object of his desire sat a pint of bitters in front of him then offered a sly smile as she gathered his empty dishes. "Good appetite this day?"

"Your mother is a great cook." Then in his softest voice, he asked. "When do you get off?"

Shaking her head, she pled with her eyes then mouthed, I can't.

He filled his lungs then nodded. "Yes, you can. And very well."

From the first, her arguments had been the same. Still, most nights, she'd found a way. Somehow, he had to convince her to come home with him once the war finally ended.

After the crowd thinned, while Emily's mother finished in the kitchen, he stood then nodded toward his second-story room, giving her a little nod. "Please come."

An hour passed sitting in the dark, then another. Finally, the door creaked open then quickly shut again. The moonlight shone on his angel. She took his breath away.

Jumping to his feet, he wrapped his arms around her. "You came. I love you, darling."

"I love you, too, John, but . . ."

"No buts. If he's still alive, if he survives the war, you'll divorce him and come with me to Texas."

"Oh, my sweetest heart, if only it could be that easy."

He hushed her with a kiss. No more talk of the husband or a future. The night belonged to him, and he had no desire to waste another minute.



The Lord's day next, broke clear and crisp. Good weather to kill or be killed—even better to get one's soul right with the Maker. As

expected, not one seat sat empty.

Soldiers warmed every bench end to end in the tent they'd given Nathaniel to hold services that morning. Sardines had more room.

Not that the buildup proved lost on the enemy, but the big push was officially on. Right outside the double flap door, a Bird Colonel grabbed his arm. "Keep your comments brief, padre." The officer spit then cursed, using the Lord's name in vain.

"No, the Lord God loves His people, sir. He'd never—"

"Don't want to hear it, Padre." The younger man snorted, stuck his unlit cigar back in his oversized mouth, then marched off as though Nathaniel was a lunatic and not worth it.

Or maybe he dared not enter into a theological debate with a chaplain. The crowd of doughboys hushed as he slipped behind the lectern.

"The Lord is mighty to save."

A few nervous amens sounded in response. Not nearly enough to give it any real credence.

"Men . . . and ladies." He nodded toward the front row where three nurses sat. "I hate to say it, but a lot of you will not survive this day." He looked the hundred-odd souls over.

The Lord didn't give him a specific word for any of them.

"The Colonel said I didn't have much time, so whoever needs salvation, come up here now. God will receive you just as you are."

Better than a dozen stood then took to making their way out to the aisle. He caught the eye of a corporal he knew, a strong believer. "Come help me, Son."

Searching the crowd, he thanked the Lord for the decisions being made. "While we pray for these men, if anyone has a song, now would be a good time."

A young man in the back stood about the time the first young soldier reached him, couldn't have been older than eighteen. The boy tilted his head and opened his mouth.

"Awake, my soul, and with the sun . . ." came out pure and sweet. Soon the tent swelled, awash with the Doxology in praise of the Most High from Whom all blessings flowed.

The tanks fired off first, and half his congregation slipped out.

Once the transport truck engines came to life, the last new believer hugged him then hurried off to his fate. Nathaniel gathered his Bible and headed toward the back. Halfway there, a sergeant he'd noticed earlier filled the tent's door.

"Chaplain, Major Carpenter said you'd mentioned me to him. I'm John Harris."

God was so good. Nathaniel stuck out his hand. "Yes, praise the Lord. Your grandmother asked my wife for me to look in on you."

Harris took the offering and shook rather vigorously. “Aww, Granny Pearl is . . . Well, she’s . . .” He shrugged as if perhaps he didn’t hold his ancestor in too high a regard. “Or rather was . . . a slave.”

Why would he feel the need to share that bit of family history? Most southern men didn’t volunteer they descended from Negro grandmothers.

“You saved, Son?”

“Yes, sir, I was baptized. But . . . well, who knows if that gets you to Heaven?”

A chill washed over Nathaniel. So much pain awaited the man. “After the war is over, come find me, John.”

For a few heartbeats, the sergeant said nothing, then he shook his head. “If I’m here. Could be years from now.”

“No, the fighting will stop this year. So many will die, and even more will be wounded, but you’ll be neither.”

“I won’t be wounded or dead? Well, that’s some good news.” The man stared right into Nathaniel’s eyes like he hunted for the ruse. Harris’ own eyes told the tale. He wanted to believe that the word was true.

Just outside, gears ground, followed by shouts, then the sound of tires crushing gravel broke the moment.

“Anyway, if I do make it, sir, I’ll look you up.”

“Good. Thank you. Go with God, John. I’ll see you before Thanksgiving.”

Tears filled the man’s eyes. He seemed to want more, but the increased activity outside pulled him out the door.

Late that night after the Lord’s peace settled his troubled soul, Nathaniel got off his knees. Sitting at the little desk, he opened Evelyn’s latest post that he’d forced himself to save until day’s end.

He wanted to relish every word without interruption.

As expected, she’d included a copy of more chapters from her new novel.

Praise the Lord for carbon paper.

He read the missive then turned the oil lamp up and propped his feet up onto his bunk.

Knowing the story was about John Harris’ grandparents made it even more exciting—if that was possible. He read the first line then steeled himself to the knowledge it would only be another installment.





To Julius Caesar Harris' surprise, he and Pretty rode off Live Oaks as though the trip had been planned for a month. No one asked where they were going or when they'd be back.

It almost disappointed him that his grandfather hadn't posted one of his hired men to watch him or try and stop him.

Truth be known, he'd expected a fight and a mad dash to freedom. But that would come.

Carter Hightower wouldn't take kindly to him stealing two horses and a slave. Only a matter of time until the old man would sic someone after him, but Jules figured to use that time to get as far down the road as possible.

By early afternoon, he reached the end of Hightower property. In a wide double-back loop, he skirted the two neighboring homesteads then headed south by southwest.

Cutting across country, he found the road that ran along the Colorado River easily enough. He stopped there, retrieved his maps, then rechecked his calculations.

With most of that first day lost dodging neighbors, he didn't plan on reaching Austin until dark-thirty the next day's evening. Galveston would come three hard days after the capital, hinged on the old man not figuring him out too quick.

He had to get to the bank before Grandfather alerted his crony.

"Masser, it be getting darker than ol' Harley. Ain't you tired of sitting that hard seat?"

"Poor Richard's says we'll have some moon tonight." He twisted in the saddle. That day was about spent.

Live Oaks must be buzzing. They'd certainly missed him by now. An urge to keep going fought his logic, but night travel over strange terrain invited trouble. Last thing he needed would be a lame horse. "Keep an eye out for a spot."

"Yessuh."

Two hundred yards up the road on the river's side, a clearing big enough to graze the horses, with a big oak in the middle, presented itself. "Looks like that'll do well enough."

"Yessuh. It be a good place. It'll do mighty good."

Without too much trouble, he hobbled the horses and built a fire while Pretty hauled water and fixed supper. Once sated and with the tucker stowed, he called the girl to his side of the fire.

"Turn around and lift your shirt, Pretty. I want to see your back again."

She complied. Even in the dim light, the scars on scars stood out like winter grapevine on an oak. His grandfather wasn't just a mean old man, he was a monster. The vile sadist deserved a slow and agonizing death.

To think his Pearl might ever suffer such a beating made his stomach knot. He had to get to Galveston in time.

He traced Pretty's shoulder with a gentle touch. "I'm sorry I didn't know before. I remember Pearl saying a couple of times you were recuperating, but I thought . . . from a fever or something."

"I's never get sick."

"Well, I never dreamed . . ." He shook his head. "Guess I stuck my nose in too many books."

She scooted back to her side. "No one except Mammy knew how bad it were."

"To do this . . . it makes him less than human." He poked the fire and studied the dancing flames. "How were you able to hide it? I'm certain Pearl would've told me had she known the gravity of your beatings."

"Did my best to keep it from her."

"But, it seems a body couldn't work after a thrashing like that."

"Iffin he give me more than one or two licks—it's what he called them—he'd let me lays up until my back quit oozing." She looked up at the moon. The fire's reflection flickered in her black eyes.

"I'm sorry, Pretty."

"Once, he even move me up to his fancy feather bed for two days like I's a queen or something."

"Humph. Doesn't impress me a bit."

"Only time he ever be nice." She lowered her head and drew circles in the dirt with a finger. "After he'd whipped me bad, he'd put salve on my back his own self. Go on and on about how sorry he was I made him do it."

Jules poked the fire again. If only the log could be the heartless old man burning. Maybe one day in hell . . . "He'll pay, Pretty. Someday, he'll pay."

She stood and moved toward his bedroll. "Mammy say Jesus gonna get him when ol' Gabe blows his horn."

"Don't know about that, but I'm telling you true, unless they hang me as a horse thief first, I'll see to it he pays."

She snickered as she shook the quilt out then spread it on a grassy patch. "Why, they'd never hang you for stealing the horses or me neither."

"Why's that?"



# Chapter Five

A small part of Nathaniel wanted to put the pages back in their envelope and lay it down for a bit. How could he stand more abuse and cruelty? But how could he not finish what his ever-so-lovely-but-somewhat-cruel wife had sent? He loved her to pieces, but sometimes . . . He grinned at exactly what he wanted to do to her.

Instead of dwelling on what he didn't have, he picked up the pages and read on about John Harris's grandfather.



In the light of the little campfire, Jules searched for the truth amidst the slave's words

"Mammy say Masser Carter done sold all his horses. Say he only had a brace of mules left when your daddy married your mama. She say all the horses be yours. And Mammy and Big Jim—that's my pappy."

"Big Jim?"

"I expects you don't remember him much—anyways, they's both your daddy's slaves when he first come to Live Oaks afore you's borned. So . . . you didn't really steal nothin'."

"What? Are you certain about all that?"

"Well, I weren't there." She spread her own thin blanket close to his then came over, knelt in front of him, and removed his boots. "But Mammy talks about Masser Harris a lot, especially when no one's around."

"And she don't make up no yarns. He a good man, she always say that. Masser Carter sold him right after your daddy passed on." She massaged his toes, exactly the way Pearl would after he'd spent a long day in boots.

"I remember that."

"Worst day of my life. Pappy getting sold off, and Masser Carter making me his bed warmer. Sho' 'nuff the worst." She stared off. "If I could'a found 'nuff grit, I would'a slit my wrists—or his throat."

"He'd deserve it."

"Hear it's a good way to go. Quick, not much pain."

Like a dream during the day, the faint echoes of a story once heard called to Jules from the worst day of his own life. His

grandfather told the deputy sheriff how his father had died. Jules had asked him about it that night.

The old man slapped his face. Didn't understand then, but no wonder. Made all too much sense in light of Pretty's revelations.

Jules rubbed his cheek. "The old man gave me Pearl on the same day he took you to his bed. She told me how scared you and her were when Mammy explained what men and boys do to girls."

She giggled. "The doing ain't the awful part. Not nearly as bad as Mammy made out."

His cheeks burned. When his own sexual awakening came—he'd already read about Caesar and his child bride—he'd still be as pure as his Pearl. "So." He patted Pretty's hand. "Mammy ever talk about the night my daddy died?"

"Oh, yes, sir." She nodded vigorously, but even in the dim firelight, he could see tears welling. "I knows all about it. Mammy done warn me though, says me and her both likely to get killed iffin I ever tell."

"No one's going to hurt you. I promise you. Tell me now, and tell me true. How did Carter Hightower murder my father?"

She looked into his eyes for a heartbeat then stared at the stars and spoke in soft tones. "Big Jim, he always look after your daddy. Good as Pearl look after you, I reckon. Something caused bad blood between your father and Masser Sam."

"What? Do you know?"

"Mammy didn't even know exactly why. 'Round then is when your momma took that train up north somewhere."

"She went to see her grandmother. Father and I hated her going, but she'd gotten a letter . . ."

"That be right. I 'members her bawling something terrible. Never seen a white woman carry on so afore that day." She bobbed her head several times then looked up at him. "The next night after she's gone, Masser Carter told Mammy to cooks up a big meal."

Her eyes widened. "That was the night—the night Big Jim seen Masser put something in your daddy's drink after supper."

"Poison?"

"He drunk it gone then keeled over dead as a fence post. Mammy says that's why Masser Carter done sold my pappy off. Yes, sir. So he couldn't tell what he saw."

Pretty pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, studying the ground again. She looked him straight in the eyes. "Don't want you to go doing something' you oughtn't, sir. Good Lord knows won't change nothin'."

Tempting for sure, but Pearl had to come first. He had to get to Galveston with money in hand before that auction took place.

“No, least not anytime soon. Got to see to your best friend. I’ll take care of the old man later.” He stretched out. “Get some sleep. We leave at first light.”



A bit before sunset of that second night, the giant had found the slaver and his muleskinner about a mile outside of town, napping under an elm. Irritated Pearl to no end when relief washed over her upon seeing the white man.

Who was worse anyway?

The would-be rapist or the man who bought and sold human beings?

She pondered that question and her lot, riding through town.

Folks on the street stared at the slave wagon, but she averted her gaze and dreamed of walking up the capital’s Main Street on Jule’s arm.

Then, she would gladly look them square in the eye, but not chained and shackled. She didn’t want anyone to notice her or look her way.

Had Jules blessed or cursed her with his education?

Was there a place for a white Nigra on the whole of God’s earth, one who’d read Homer and could recite The Iliad? She scooted further under the wagon seat, curled into a ball, and cried wet, bitter tears for her lost love and life.

“Sweet Jules, please save me.”

Those words rolled off her lips easy as a string of lies from a peddler’s mouth. She came to her senses, then instead of her beloved, called on God in Heaven. Like Mammy said, the Almighty will always be there for you.

But a body had to pray.

So Pearl prayed hard for the Good Lord to send her Jules.

Long after the sun set and the wagon stopped, she stayed there under the seat, begging God for the impossible. She stirred a bit when Cy pulled the knuckleheads down and hauled them off, but even a good stretch didn’t stop her praying.

“Wake up, gal.” A hand shook her shoulder. She jerked up and thought for a blessed moment that Jules shook her. “Stick your leg up here, gal. Masser Holace be wanting you.”

She complied, heartbroken anew it wasn’t her beloved. “Where we going, Cy?”

He unlocked her shackle then lifted her out. “They’s having a cock fight in that barn yonder. Guess Masser be wantin’ to show you off

some.”

“Don’t want to be showed off.”

The giant tilted her chin upwards. “You know you be a pleasure to look at, don’t ya, gal?”

Pearl smiled then tugged on her dress while the muleskinner walked her toward the two-story brick structure he claimed was a barn. The building looked nothing like the beautiful stone stables at Live Oaks.

The crickets serenaded the summer night, but for the life of her, she couldn’t think of a reason to sing. Stupid bugs. They were blessed with no worries.

He opened the side door, and a low rumbling of many voices drowned out the crickets’ song. The acrid stench of too many confined bodies and cigar smoke stung her nose.

Must have been over a hundred men and boys inside; some sat on hay bales in the lofts that ran the full length on both sides.

The majority crowded around a knee-high wooden circle in the center of the big building’s dirt floor. Cy eased her to the right, keeping in the shadows.

Surprised her that several women joined the rowdies; fancy-looking ladies like those who attended Mrs. Harris’ parties.

The buzz grew louder, then the spectators turned to shouting cheers and jeers when two men stepped into the ring, each holding their roosters. They circled, thrusting the birds at the other.

She poked Cy. “Why are they doing that?”

“Pecking gets them cocks riled up.” He threw a nod to the bigger of the two men. “That’s Masser’s brother. His birds always gots good fight in ’em.”

“What’s that leather on their feet?”

Big Cy glanced at her with a grin then back to the controlled sparring.

“Holds ’em spurs onto they’s legs.” He pointed. “Both these here’s wearing brass. See there? Looks like gold, don’t it? Some folks likes bone or steel for the cutting, but I like that golden brass best—for its shining.”

In unison, the handlers pitched the roosters toward the center of the ring then retreated to the sideboards. The crowd went wild.

Scattered dust danced on the lantern’s beams as the poor creatures flew again and again at each other. Necks wide as her hand, the birds’ wings flapped wildly.

Golden spurs flailed the air then sliced into feathers and flesh as one struck the other. Again then again.

She didn’t want to watch, hoped someone would stop the gruesome contest, but as it progressed, found herself rooting for the

cock with a single red feather in his tail. The smallest of the pair, he only fought when the other attacked.

The mean bird circled to the right with his wings spread and neck bowed. Red Feather turned a tight circle, his head pulled down tight.

Bully squawked then charged. He flapped himself high enough to throw his spurs forward.

Red Feather flew out to meet him but didn't get his spurs up fast enough. Brass buried deep into Red's chest.

For the briefest pause, the gamblers held their tongues. Then Bully strutted and crowed his victory.

The caw suddenly became deafening as the winners cheered, gloated, and demanded their payoffs.

Holace's brother scooped up his victorious rooster and rubbed his head while the other man stood and glared at poor dead Red Feather. Money changed hands, and the losers shouted for the next fight.

How cruel.

Were they going to do the whole horrible thing all over again?

Holace parted the crowd and stepped over the boards with a hand in the air.

"Gentlemen." He bowed toward the far wall where most of the fancy women stood. "And Ladies. Before the next fight, there's a very special Nigra girl I brought tonight. Want to give you gents first look."

Pearl's heart raced and her mouth went suddenly dry. Not here. No!

"This little gal's the prettiest high-yeller I've ever seen, and . . . she's intact if you know what I mean."

Her face burned. How could he say that? She lowered her eyes.

Her handler cleared his throat. "Excuse me, ladies, for the mention of such indelicacies, but it adds to the girl's value, don't you see? Cy, bring her on over here."

The giant pressed his hand against her back. "Come on, Pearl."

Stiffening, she dug in her heels. She didn't want to be on display for that bunch of rowdies. Tears blurred her vision, and fear swept over her in horrible waves, threatening to drown her very soul. But he only pressed harder.

"Ain't nothing a body can do, gal, so come on before we both gets the strap."

She hated it that he was right.

What could either of them do about her lot?

Nothing. She found Jules in her mind's eye, then for his sake, lifted her chin. She swiped the giant's hand away and strolled through the parted crowd of gawkers.

The slaver met her at the sideboard and lifted her over.

"I ask you, boys, now, ain't she a sight to behold?" He twirled his



finger in the air.

Slowly, Pearl circled, hating the leers that taunted her. She couldn't stop the tears that ran down and scalded her cheeks. Oh, Jules. Where was her love?

"I was on my way to the Galveston blocks, but brother clued me into this little shindig." He shrugged. "What do you think, men? Should we have us an auction right here? Or does she go back to the wagon?"

A potbellied man with a pig's snout of a nose pointed at Pearl. "I'll give ya five hundred dollars for her if she's really a virgin." Coming from the first row, his voice sounded higher pitched than a stuck hog.

His equally foul-looking friend elbowed him and nodded his agreement furiously.

She burned inside and out. Breathing deep, she closed her eyes, lowered her head, then gritted her teeth. She steeled herself, determined not to break down and burst into wails.

Ignoring her charred insides, she shouted her prayer to the Lord in her head.

But heard the bidding still.

"Six hundred, virgin or not." Someone in the back hollered.

In his prissy squeal, Porky answered. "Six-fifty."

Like a line of dominos falling, bids came in from all over until Porky shouted. "Fifteen hundred, cash money."

The room fell silent. Holace held out his hand and turned slowly, searching the crowd. "Are we all done?"

"Pull that dress off! Need a better look at what we're bidding on."

Pearl opened her eyes wide, begging the slaver, but Holace only nodded. His bottom lip pouted. He stepped toward her. She crossed her arms over her chest, retreated a step, and shook her head against the disgusting plan.

How could they?

"Sixteen hundred." A woman called out. "And leave the dress on the girl."

Oh, dear God, thank You. Bless You, Lord.

Pearl turned and searched the crowd for her angel.

"Sixteen it is." Holace bowed toward the shadows under the loft.

The pig man glanced over his shoulder then back at her. "Sixteen-fifty."

"Seventeen!" The lady bid before Holace could even repeat the man.

"Seventeen-fifty."

"Eighteen," the lady shot back.

The rage in the fat man's face almost brought a snicker to Pearl's throat, but fear called her to keep her peace. Piggy didn't look like the

kind who tolerated being the butt.

The man wiped his mouth. "Eighteen hundred and one dollar."

"Eighteen-fifty." God's tool of salvation shouted her bid with a lilting tease in her voice.

Potbelly spun around. "Who's bidding against me?"

The crowd, obviously enjoying themselves, parted and revealed an older woman.

"I am. Now do you care to bid again, or should I collect my property?"

The red-faced fat man faced Holace. "My credit any good?"

" 'Til when?"

"When the bank opens in the morning."

Holace nodded. "I'll be here that long, I reckon."

"Nineteen hundred."

"Nineteen-fifty."

Potbelly rubbed his hands together then glanced at the woman.

"Pull her dress off. I want to see what I'm buying."

"Don't you lay a hand on her clothing." The lady strolled toward the ring. "By law, as the highest bidder, that's my property."

"Two thousand, undress her."

Dear Lord, shut his mouth.

How high would the woman go?

The lady smiled. "Two thousand and fifty."

Porky glared at his opponent—half his size—then back at Pearl.

Hush up. Hush up. She chanted in her head.

Lord, mute that horrible man.

"Twenty-one hundred dollars."

With no hesitation, "Twenty-one fifty." The lady replied so fast he didn't even have a chance to demand again she be stripped.

The fat man studied Pearl for what seemed to be an hour by the beating of her heart, then shook his head. "She ain't worth it."

Oh, thank You, God. Praise you, sweet Jesus.

The woman held out her hand. "Come here, child."

Pearl ran toward her as though she was the mother she never knew. "Bless you, ma'am."

Holace grabbed her arm before he cleared the ring's short wall. "Wait just a minute there, gal." He looked at the lady. "What about my money?"



Nathaniel shook his head. What a corker Evelyn was, ending the

chapter to where he—and all her other poor readers—had to start the next one. Except, he had no page to turn because she hadn't written it.

Oh, if she was there, he'd count her ribs until she gave him the rest of the story.

A laugh escaped, offering a moment of joy amidst war's daily horrors. His sweet wife acted like she hated the tickling, but he knew better.

Slipping out of his chair, he went onto his knees. "Lord, keep her. Protect her. Cause her . . ."

A chill washed over him as the sounds of war shook his soul. The insanity unfolded before his inner eye, and he suddenly knew exactly what he had to do.

He stood and looked skyward. "Yes, Lord."



# Chapter Six

The sergeant rolled the form in triplicate out of his Underwood, tapped the pages on his desk, then laid them in front of Nathaniel. "Here, sir. And here." He pointed out the two lines that needed his signature.

Once finished, the man answered his question without him asking. "Next truck leaves shortly. You're good to go, sir."

Nathaniel stood then nodded. "Only God is good, son. The rest of us are either redeemed or not. What's the condition of your soul?"

The man smiled. "All is well. Bless you, Chaplain, for asking."

In the short bumpy ride to the front, he presented the Good News, and three of the twelve men crowded in the back accepted the Lord's salvation. But then as the poet claimed, there were no atheists in the trenches.

The closer the two-ton steel behemoth rumbled toward the war, the louder the bombs' booms and the thicker the acidic stench of gunpowder clogged his nostrils.

The truck stopped. Nathaniel climbed out and knelt. "Oh, Lord, save us all."



The bedroom door eased open. Evelyn slipped off the bed and waved her friend in, nodding toward the alcove. Once in the little sitting area at the far end from her bed, she smiled.

"Buddy is such a little booger some nights. He was so tired but fought going to sleep . . ."

"I know. Mine do the same thing." Helen stared at the window awkwardly. It almost seemed like she avoided eye contact. Something was definitely amiss.

"You don't have to read this chapter tonight if you don't want. What's wrong? Is someone sick?"

"No, everyone's fine. I want to help you, and I'm loving this story, but . . ." She closed her eyes and filled her lungs then exhaled rather too dramatically. Poor thing, her expression remained so grim. "I don't want to at all, but I can't not tell you."

"Me? Tell me what?"

"It's Nathaniel."

Her breath caught. "Nathaniel? What about him? What have you heard?"

"We figured you didn't know. He volunteered to go to the front."

"What, when? How do you know this?"

"I got a letter from Bob this morning. He says the Major gave up his post at headquarters and asked to be reassigned to the front."

Oh, her dear husband . . . why did he feel he had to keep things from her? It certainly sounded exactly like him. Nathaniel knew enough of his future to know he'd not die in France.

"He'll be fine." She picked up the latest chapter and held the pages out. "If you'd be so kind, it does help so much to hear it read aloud."

Helen took the offering, but instead of reading, she leaned forward. "He's been doing double duty as a stretcher bearer."

Tears blurred her vision, suddenly welling, but she blinked them back.

"Without a vision, the Lord's people perish. My Nathaniel has seen his and it came with a true word from God. He'll be fine, not hurt in any way, and come home to me. My dearest is precisely where the Lord wants him, I have no doubt."

"You aren't worried? I couldn't help it. I'd be worried sick."

"Well, that's just so much a wasted effort. Tell me what worry ever did to improve any situation. All it does is hurt your body; you can actually get sick from too much of it."

"What else can you do?"

"Pray? Believe? Worry is nothing but a slap to God's face because all it says is that you don't trust Him. As if you don't think He's big enough or able to do a thing. Not me. I refuse to."

"You always make it sound so logical and easy. Hadn't thought about it before in that vein though . . . that worrying actually insulted God. You know me well enough to know I'd never want to do that."

"I do. Now if you'd be so kind as to read."

"Of course. Oh, and Bob said your husband is leading dozens if not hundreds of men to Jesus almost every day."

"Hallelujah! See? It's all part of God's plan."

Helen leaned back, straightened the manuscript's pages, then cleared her throat and read.

The pretty woman who'd won the bid stretched the strings on her handbag then pulled out a wad of greenbacks. The slave trader grinned like a sharecropper's child with a candy cane the whole time the lady counted out Pearl's price.

"Thank you most kindly, ma'am. What name should I put on the bill of sale?"

"Ruth Worthington. I'd be most appreciative if you would remove the shackles and chains, now."

The slaver motioned Cy over. A big grin covered the giant's whole face. He kneeled, unlocked the shackle, then glanced up at Pearl, giving her a wink.

Miss Ruth smiled. "Come, child. I've had enough gaming for one night."

As told, Pearl followed her benefactor outside the smelly barn into the fresh night air. While she said her farewells and collected her extra dress, her new owner took the arm of an

exceptionally handsome gentleman.

Like an eager pup on her first hike, she trailed behind the couple without a nod from either.

No chain for her. No need. Miss Ruth had the softest and kindest eyes Pearl had ever seen.

"Thank you, Lord." Pearl practically prayed with each breath as the man and woman carried her away in the most elegant carriage she'd ever seen, much less ridden in. Her heart swelled so, it might burst.

If Jules could see her . . . She kept thanking God over and over.

What had she done to deserve such a blessing?

It thrilled her that the Lord kept the pig man from buying her. She didn't know how she could ever find any joy in the house of such a vile man. God certainly had His angels watching over her.

Melting into the carriage's leather seat like the queen she dreamed of being one day, she gasped at a horrible thought that struck her.

What if the nice lady was like Brutus's mother, Servilia? What if she only seemed to be nice but really stalked around doing evil; a monster who put her slaves to death for the slightest offenses.

Miss Ruth patted Pearl's hand, bringing her back to reality. "So what's your name, honey?"

"Pearl, ma'am."

"That's a lovely name." The woman left her hand atop Pearl's, grasping it ever so gently. "And where have you come from, dear?"

"Live Oaks, ma'am. Believe it's north of here . . . leastwise best I've been able to keep up. Been my home since I can remember, but Mammy—she's the cook—claimed I was born to a white woman in New Orleans."

She wiped away her fears.

The sweet lady didn't have a Servilia bone in her body.

"Pearl?" The lady tilted her head as though thinking deep on something. "You speak very well, not the Nigra slang I'm accustomed to. Did all the slaves at Live Oaks speak the King's English as well?"

Lowering her eyes, she stared at her clean feet. How could she forget and expose herself as educated? No matter now. A lie for this gracious woman would never do.

"No, ma'am. Only me. Well, while I was there, I stayed careful to talk like the rest, but a friend taught me to read and write and speak proper English. Someday, I hoped to buy myself—be a free woman—but now. . . I'll never be able to repay you such a great price."

"Oh dear, I'd hoped . . . I thought . . ."

"No matter, though. Glory be, ma'am. You saved me, you did." Her gaze rose to meet Miss Ruth's kind eyes. "Belonging to you . . . it's already a blessing. 'Twas Almighty God who sent you, I can testify."

"There's no need to—"

"I'll serve you well, ma'am, and be eternally grateful to you as long as I live. I promise."

A smile lit the lady's face, and the love in her eyes pierced Pearl's heart.

"Oh, good then. Praise the Lord. Well, I think it's wonderful—you knowing how to read and speak properly. This friend of yours must be quite a dear person. So tell me, Pearl, how did you come to be in Austin?"

"Mister Sam—he owns Live Oaks."

"North of here, you say? Carter Hightower?"

"Yes, ma'am, one and the same. Well, he found out I wrote a pass for a friend—so she could go see her family for a few hours—and sold me to that slave trader, Holace. But I don't believe that was the real reason."

"Oh?"

"Mister Sam? I think he used the incident as an excuse. I suspected he'd been looking for one about six months or so."

"Had you done something to anger him?"

"Yes, ma'am. Well, not me, rather my Jules upset him, not providing the old man—his grandfather—with more property."

"Is Jules the one who taught you how to read and write?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was his bedwarmer, but ever since last summer when my flow came, his

grandfather had been pestering my Jules about a right nice, high yellor piccaninny."

For the rest of the ride, Miss Ruth asked no more questions.

The gentleman with the silver-streaked hair and eyes so sure and strong, turned out to be Miss Ruth's brother. Mister Jeremiah escorted her to her front door then kissed the top of her head as he was a good foot taller.

"You must stop attending such gruesome events, Sister. No good can come from such debauchery. You mind my words and hear them well."

"Of course, I hear you, Brother dear. I have two ears working perfectly well." She glanced down at Pearl. "I'd definitely take that to debate. I'd say something very good came from my attendance there tonight. Quite exceptional, as a matter of fact."

Spunk. That's what she had, and Pearl liked it. The lady herself was quite exceptional in her eyes. And she definitely appreciated her perceptions.

"See you in a few days, Ruthie."

"You're leaving? Now?" She grabbed his shirt sleeve. "Aww, can't you come in, Jeremiah? We've a half-finished game in the parlor."

Removing her hand, he backed away a step. "Sorry, not tonight. It'll keep. I'm leaving first light."

"But it's your move."

"Queen's pawn takes your bishop."

She smiled. "You're getting old and feeble-minded. Thanks for taking me this evening." Her gaze fell again on Pearl, and she smiled even broader. "Assuredly, the Lord intended that I should be there." She waved him off. "You be careful. I love my Brother."

"Good place for a sip of tea." The closest thing to a sister Evelyn had ever known, her reader looked up and smiled. "This is so good, friend. I don't know how you do it. So . . . amazing."

"Thank you, dear Helen. Please go on."

"Certainly."

"While he rode toward the capital, Jules told Pretty the history of Texas. Her interest and hunger for knowledge reminded him of Pearl's. Exactly like his true love, the girl wanted to know everything. Every time he paused for a breath, she asked another question.

At the outskirts of town, he ceased his narrative and looked over his shoulder. The western sky promised only a few more minutes of light.

"If I remember right, there's a campsite down by the river." He nodded south. "Do we need anything for supper?"

"Naw, sir. Mammy seen to it. We still gots plenty."

Jules nodded and made a mental note to start working on her grammar. It shamed him to have her butcher the King's English so. As he'd accurately remembered, a good piece of flat ground down on the Colorado's bank beckoned campers.

Several different groups already claimed the best spots, but he found a nice-enough corner, and as Pretty promised, she took care of him.

By the time he had the horses fed, watered, and hobbled, fatback fried over a small fire. Jules eased down cross-legged on his bedroll.

She glanced up with a worried expression. "Some folk been talking 'bout a man named Lincoln. You knows something about him?"

"Some. Why? What were they saying?"

"They be saying a war is coming on account he wants all the slaves to be free, own they own selves. Suppose that might be true?"

He nodded. "That's what I've heard, but I don't believe it will come to war. The politicians can surely work something out."

Pretty stabbed a piece of meat and handed it to him with a chunk of cold cornbread. "Could that man really sets us slaves all free?"

"Maybe if he gets elected president." Jules set the bread on his knee and tossed the hot meat from hand to hand. "Not certain how that'd work though. I've not studied the Constitution a lot, but I can't see the South sitting still for those up North making such a thing come to pass."



"I sure was hoping . . ."

"If Lincoln should try such a thing, then I suppose there would be a good chance for war after all."

She ate in silence. After talking most the day, he found the peace and quiet refreshing. Sated by her more than adequate, tasty meal, he leaned back and searched the night sky for the star. His and Pearl's star. It twinkled at him. Was she looking at it, too, at that very moment?

If only he knew where she was. She couldn't get sold before he found her. If that despicable Holace took her to Galveston like he said, Jules should beat him there.

What if war did break out? He could never bring himself to fight to preserve slavery, but could he fight to abolish it either? How could he side against family and friends?

Pretty leaned over and touched his knee. "Masser Jules? What if we don't want to be free? What would I do then?"

"Oh, Pretty."

Her eyes widened, and she spoke as though telling a ghost a secret. "Masser, we gonna go gets Pearl, then me and her gonna stay together with ya 'til the sun don't shine no more. Ain't that right?"

"Well—"

"Please, suh, tell Pretty no matter what, ya won't makes me be free. I knows ya never going to let Pearl out of ya sight again, an' no matter what, ya be needing Pretty to takes good care of the two of ya, ain't that right?"

"Yes, that's right. Now let's get some rest."

The part of Jules that hadn't slept woke the rest of him. He peeped his left eye open a smidgen.

A man knelt by the roan, Pretty's horse, working on the hobble. Jules sprang to his feet, leaped over the sleeping slave girl, took two long strides, then threw himself at the fellow.

"Thief!" He pounded the man's back.

The horse shied away. The man rolled to the right, knocking Jules to the ground.

The intruder scrambled to his feet. "Leave me be, boy, I didn't do nothing to you." He backed away a step and swiped his backside.

"He's got a knife, Masser Jules."

"I know." He pushed himself up and pulled out his belt in one swift motion. "You, sir, are a liar and a horse thief." He swung the leather strap.

The man dodged and swiped the air with his blade then sidestepped toward the horse. "I said leave me be, boy, before I have to cut you."

"Get help, Pretty. Rouse the camps."

The girl took off, hollering as she went. "Help! Help! Horsethief!"

Never taking his eyes off the villain, he could hardly believe what he witnessed.

The idiot took another step toward the roan.

How could he possibly think he was still going to steal her? Jules angled toward the animal and doubled his belt. He worked for position.

"You'll not take my horse."

The thief lunged at Jules with the knife then retreated closer to the animal. "Back off now, son, and I'll not press charges. This is my horse. I'm the rightful owner, and I'm going to take him."

His plan worked. Folks gathered, forming a wide circle with himself and the man in its center, but no one seemed ready to help. He nodded as if he might let the man take his horse.

The intruder dropped to one knee and found the hobble. With his off-hand, he began tugging on the knot without taking his eyes off Jules or lowering his weapon.

"So you say I stole that horse?" Jules stepped closer but not within arm's length.

"That's right." He jerked at the knot, but it never budged. "You mind your manners now, and I'll not cause a fuss. Only want my horse back." He yanked again and freed the hobble from one leg.

The man glanced at the horse's leg.

Jules lashed at the man's knife hand.

The strap found flesh.

The blade flew free.

The thief cursed.

Jules pounced on the man.

The horse reared then trotted away.

For too long, he struggled with the older man. Then a boom stopped the fight.

"That's enough."

The thief looked at the man holding the hogleg on him, shrugged, then turned and dashed into the night.

"Humph." Standing, Jules dusted himself off. "Appears it wasn't his horse after all."

Pretty came running up. "Oh praise! Praise be! You alive! You alive! Whatever would I do if ya got ya'self killed?"

Evelyn waited. Helen was tough but fair. Her friend only sat there, with a troubled countenance, and didn't open her mouth. What was wrong with her? Was it that bad?

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. "So? Helen? What do you think? Should I throw it in the trash and start over?"

"Oh, no! It's truly a work of art. You are such a good storyteller. Why, I'd swear I was right there at that campground, seeing the fight. Oh, Evelyn, it's simply great."

As soon as her gushing died down, the troubled expression returned. "Friend . . . I was thinking . . ." She caught Evelyn's gaze. "About Nathaniel."

"Nathaniel? What about him?"

"There's something else I need to tell you."



# Chapter Seven

Evelyn waited, but her friend didn't spill her beans on whatever her husband had put in his letter about Nathaniel. For sure and for certain, she hated not knowing a thing, but . . . if it concerned her husband . . .

"Helen, you have to tell me whatever it is. Especially now that I know there's something you know I don't. You'd want me to share news I heard on Robert."

"I would, it's true. But . . . well, he's been going to brothels." The dear lady seemed to melt into her chair.

How could she wear that look of relief? Or smugness?

No, she would never be self-righteous toward Evelyn. She replayed her friend's words, trying to digest some different meaning from them; something more palatable, but nothing about them tasted any good and she only wanted to spit!

"What?" The declaration surprised her, nothing like what she'd expected. "A house with whores? Is that what you're saying?"

Her cheeks flushed hot, but even before that green-eyed monster could rear its ugly head, she rejected the notion completely that her Nathaniel would betray her or God or . . .

She chuckled.

"You're laughing? Why for goodness sake? I, for one, do not believe a chaplain should be caught dead in such a place as that. What business does a Holiness minister have with those sort of women? I can't imagine you aren't crushed. I'm so sorry that he . . . went there and visited those . . . ladies of the evening!"

"What about Jesus?"

"What about Him?"

"I'm talking about His reaction to Mary Magdalene or the lady caught in adultery. Or the woman at the well. You know those stories."

"I never realized there were so many."

"No telling how many other prostitutes the Lord brought to repentance. He said he came to seek the lost. Who more needs a Savior than a woman who sells her body?" She smiled partly at her friend's leap toward righteous indignation on Evelyn's behalf.

But Helen hadn't had the opportunity to really get to know Nathaniel.

The false accusation prompted a scene out of the past, and she couldn't help herself. Mostly the grin came from the remembrance of poor Nathaniel telling her about waking up in a madam's bed when he

was fifteen.

Praise the Lord he wasn't plagued with his daddy's lust for strange women.

"Well, still. That's just completely different."

"Tell me how. Do you really believe my Nathaniel went there as a paying customer? No, of course not. He could only be trying to save the ladies' souls."

Helen shook her head then looked away. "I don't know. Robert didn't say. Only that he was seen outside a brothel talking to several of the French tarts."

"Not that I'm a betting lady, but my money would be on my beloved preaching Jesus and Him crucified—not trying to solicit any favors."

"I hope you're right."

"Of course I am. Don't be silly. Did Robert say anything else?"

"Nothing else about Nathaniel. He praised the soldiers' high morale and prays with us all that the war will be over sooner than later."

Evelyn extended her hands. "Let's pray to that end."

For the next few minutes, she listened as her friend sought the Lord, took her turn, then finished with a hymn. She stood. "Bless you, dear friend, for all your help. What would I do without you?"

Ducking her head a little, Helen extended her arms opened wide. "I was afraid you'd be upset with me for bringing bad news."

Evelyn hugged her. "Never."

After cheeks were kissed, and the door eased shut, her mind's eye wandered back to a day a week before the wedding.

Nathaniel had borrowed Daddy's office with special permission for them to be alone, but only with her overly protective father sitting in the hall to the left of the door.

Her intended looked across the desk, but instead of his usual lighthearted smile, he wore a worried expression.

"There's something I've got to tell you, sweetheart."

She sat a bit straighter, then steeled her heart. What had he done? "Fine. Get to it then, I'm sitting right here, and my ears belong to you." She grinned. "Soon enough, all of me will belong to you."

He returned her grin, seemed to bask in the future she promised, then turned serious. "When Pa and I drove that herd to Kansas . . . that first time, when you were only six and I was fifteen . . . well."

"Spit it out, it'll make no never mind."

"Here it is. I got drunk that night and woke up the next morning naked in the madam's bed." He threw his palms out toward her. "But so help me God, nothing happened—not between me and her. Nothing except me getting soaked."

“Oh, Nathaniel.”

He stared right into her eyes, not flinching or looking away.

“Nothing happened.”

“Why were you in a whorehouse in the first place?”

“Pa. He wanted to go there. Claimed they had cold beer on account of their ice house. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect he’d been there before, more than once. Appeared to be sweet on one of the ladies.”

“Uncle Charley? He’s a . . . a . . .”

“Whoremonger is what Ma calls him sometimes. That the word you’re hunting?”

She hiked one shoulder. “You promised me you’d stop drinking.”

“Hard liquor. And I did, not one drop has passed my lips in all these years since I gave you my pledge. Anyway, all this happened before you caught me nipping in the Colonel’s barn so long ago.”

“Nathaniel, I’ve kept myself pure. Can you say the same?”

Was that a sparkle in his eye? He grinned. “Oh, yes, ma’am. After that one time, whenever Pa and I were out alone and he got the itch, I’d bed down in the livery. Make him go alone.”

“I take it Aunt Lacey knows.”

“Some of it, but not all. I’d rather it never came up again. They’ve been doing better of late.”

After that day, she never looked at the man she’d called uncle all her life the same again, but it swelled her heart that Nathaniel had waited for her to come of age.

So sweet. Him fifteen and her asking him to wait, telling him she was worth waiting for like she’d heard so many times that her mother had said to her father.

Even though only six then, she’d never forget that day.

What a silly little girl she was!

But she knew what she wanted, way back then, and had no regrets over being so forward.

She slipped into bed and cuddled Buddy. She loved him beyond measure and could only stand Nathaniel being gone because God had given her the precious child, so much like his father.

If only her daughter had lived. But just like her PawPaw was wont to say.

“The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”



A warmth filled Nathaniel's heart and spread. He laid his hands on the man's chest then put his mouth next to the soldier's ear. "In the name of Jesus."

The guy's eyes popped opened; he sucked a breath then another. "I was in . . . Oh! It was horrible."

"I know. I saw it. The Lord's giving you another chance. Save your soul, son, before it's too late."

"Yes, please. What do I have to do?"

"Repent and ask Jesus to save you. Call on His name."

The doughboy prayed right then, and for the next few minutes, Nathaniel comforted the man—well, barely, couldn't be twenty yet—as he died the second time.

But unlike the first, a smile graced his face. He'd been redeemed. What a gift! The Lord let him come back from damnation to eternal life. He looked at the hospital tent's ceiling.

"Why, Lord? Why him and not so many others?"

For several seconds, he listened with his spiritual ears, but no answer came. He knew the Word said the Lord loved Jacob, but hated his brother.

Difficult to understand God's ways sometimes.

The man who would be the father of the twelve tribes played the deceiver, yet he sought the Lord. His twin cared no more for his birthright than a bowl of porridge.

Outside, the battle raged on, and Nathaniel put the dead man out of his thoughts. Too many living to tend. That night, when he finally lay down, he again pondered the why. Why that man? Why him? Why his father?

Blissful sleep found him, but in half a dozen winks, he was eight again, sitting his own seat, having a nice dinner with his big brother and parents.

The dogs took to barking. He grabbed a chunk of cornbread and cold trailed his father out onto the front porch. A black buggy turned off the road onto his lane.

"Who is it, Pa? Kind of like the doc's rig, but that ain't his horse."

His father turned toward him, a rather grim expression plastered on his face. "Best fetch your mother."

"Why? Who is it?"

"Get her. And you never mind who."

He did as told, though she lollygagged a bit and took her sweet time. She and his older half-brother joined him and Pa as the long-legged brute pulling the buggy reined to a stop.

H. J. jumped over the steps to the ground and grabbed the bridle and tied him off. Sure seemed the chestnut didn't much like standing still. The huge, beautiful horse pawed the dirt a time or three.

The lady and boy with her got out. “Charley, good to see you again.” She smelled real good. Her most outstanding feature, opposite from his mother’s long straight hair, hers curled like a mass of springs exploding around her beautiful face.

Who was she? He’d never seen her before for sure. And where’d she come from?

“Good to see you, too, Marah. Must say, it’s a bit of a surprise, but . . .” Pa never glanced back at Ma, couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the stranger. But he did, only long enough to study her boy for a bit. “And who’s this?”

The young man, maybe H. J.’s age, threw his chin toward Pa. “This him, Mother? Is this my father?”

Ma gasped then stepped in front of Pa, whirling with fire in her eyes. “Charles Nightingale! Who are these people?”

“Well, Lacey.” He shrugged. “This would be Marah O’Connor, from up in Connecticut. And from the looks of things, my son.”

Nathaniel sat upright in his cot.

Why’d he dream of his brother?

From that day forward, to be sure, Nathaniel’s life changed so much. But praise God, he wouldn’t be there in France leading so many to the Lord’s salvation if not for that day and how it altered his life.

Transformed his and so many other folks’, too.

Mostly for good, but it left a lot of hurt hearts in its wake.

Though he tried finding sweet slumber again, not long after, he decided perhaps the time could be better spent and slipped off his cot onto his knees.

“Bless Your name, Lord. Thank you for this day.”



The war raged. Kill or be killed continued right up to the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918.

Then it ended.

But had it really?

The combatants only agreed to the Armistice, so what exactly did that mean?

Ten days later while preaching to a tent full of grateful ex-combatants, the Lord dropped a word of knowledge into Nathaniel’s heart, the hearing followed by a vision.

Hot tears overflowed as he witnessed a devastation even worse than the horrific war he’d lived through. The sight slammed him to his



knees.

With one hand on the lectern, he sank to the floor and wept. Many hands touched his head and shoulders. They couldn't know, could they? Had God shown them?

Several men prayed, sought God on his behalf, but . . . He shook his head then grabbed an offered forearm, and the man helped him to his feet.

"Men." Nathaniel wiped his cheeks. "I covet your prayers, but what took me to my knees just now is what awaits. There's an evil in the earth this war failed to vanquish. In . . ." He closed his eyes, and the date came to him. "On the first day of September 1939, the war will resume, and . . . Oh, Lord, have mercy on us all."

"What'd you see, sir?" The soldier's voice carried apprehensive reverence.

"More than ten times the dead. Unleashed horrors only the pit of hell could best." Slowly he looked at the doughboys' faces.

Most appeared concerned, but clearly some disbelief as well.

"Pray God changes what He showed me. Pray that you and yours won't be involved. But most of all, pray the Lord keeps you strong in Him."

"What can we do, Chaplain?"

"Teach your sons and daughters to seek Him and to abstain from evil."

A hardy round of amens filled the tent. Nathaniel figured that home and hearth interested his congregation way more than what was going to happen twenty years off.

"If anyone needs prayer, come forward. If someone has a song or hymn, please feel free to lead it. Otherwise, we're dismissed. Go with God."

A couple of dozens asked for healing. None of the instant miracles he'd seen so often on the battlefield ensued. But what pained his heart worse, no new converts came forward to pray for their eternal souls.

After hospital rounds, he headed to the mess tent, got himself a cup of what tasted like the morning's leftover coffee, and took his normal place in the back corner.

Before he could choke down even half of his Joe, a familiar face appeared.

"Reverend." John Harris slipped into the bench across from him. "You were right. Not a scratch. How'd you know?"



John waited for an answer, but only got a grin for his trouble. The older man held up his cup. "They made a new pot a few minutes back. I'd sure enjoy a fresh one if you'd be so kind."

He jumped to his feet. "Yes, sir. Of course. Cream or sugar?"  
"Black's good."

With one for the chaplain and another for himself, he returned. But he ignored the question, and John nervously made small talk, wondering how to broach the subject.

The man only sipped his brew between nods and one-word grunts. Well, he didn't have to tell everything he knew.

Six sips in, the reverend leaned a bit forward. "How can I help you, son?"

Swallowing, John gave him a little gesture of agreement; that's why he sought the man out. "Well, sir . . . When I was at tank school, you see, I met this lady, and well . . . I've fallen pretty hard."

"Not unusual, considering the circumstances."

"She says she can't come back to Texas—at least not now. Anyway... uh... if I muster out here in France, then I'll have to pay my own way back home. The only option I see is to stay. But if I take the promotion they've offered, I'd have to re-up—definitely not what I'd planned."

"What's waiting in Texas?"

"My family has a farm in the Hill Country. My father's getting along, but . . ." He shrugged. "And there's a girl I was sweet on, but . . . nothing like Emily. I feel so strong for her, and . . ."

Nightingale leaned back and stared at him for what had to be a full minute, then came forward again, shaking his head. "Son, I was about to tell you to follow your heart, but I got a check in my spirit. There's something you're not telling me?"

John bowed his head. Of course, but how'd Nightingale know something was amiss? He looked up. "She's married."

"This Emily in England?"

"Yes, sir, but she doesn't love him. She loves me."

"Do they have children?"

"One little girl, but she adores me, too. She's never even seen her father. It could work out. All I know is, I can't stand the thought of leaving her behind."

"Didn't you tell me you've been baptized?"

"Yes, sir."

"Know the story of David and Bathsheba?"

Who didn't? He saw what was coming and hated the direction the chaplain steered the conversation. What could he do but nod?

"Even though the king was a man after the Lord's own heart, the sword never left his house. Don't curse yourself, John, by stealing

another man's wife."

Tears threatened, but he held them back, refused to allow them. The man's words were true. He'd been fooling himself into thinking he could have Emily.

He pushed himself to his feet. How could he argue with the truth? What had he expected the chaplain to say? "I know you're right, sir."

"The girl back home—is she a good woman?"

A wry chuckle came out his nose. "Oh yes, good as they come, but I know now that I don't love her."

Nightingale nodded toward the chair. "Sit a bit longer."

John didn't want to. But the man had been so right about everything, what would it hurt to hear him out? He eased back down.

"The Apostle Paul told us husbands to love our wives. He wouldn't have done that if love was something we couldn't control. Now, if I was a betting man—and I'm not—I'd wager that what you feel for this English lady is very strong, but not love."

"But it is, I'm certain of it."

The old boy grinned. "My father told me once that he loved all women. But in the end, he admitted it was only lust, and that he only loved my mother—had since they were children."

"So your advice . . . is for me to go home, marry Miranda, and forget Emily."

"Isn't that what you know in your heart you should do?"

Though not what he'd wanted to hear, he couldn't deny what the preacher said was the truth. He closed his eyes, but couldn't see the solution he craved.

Of its own accord, his head bobbed. He looked up. "I love our land. Nothing finer than a freshly plowed field; lots of hard work, but the reward's beyond anything I'd find staying in the Army."

"The Word says out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. What I just heard tells me you belong in Texas. If I was you, son, I'd get myself back there."

He stood and extended his hand. "Thank you, sir."

"Go with God, John."



Beyond dark-thirty, Nathaniel ministered in the mess tent's corner, then went to make a round in the hospital. Back in his quarters, to his surprise, three manila envelopes waited on his bunk.

It'd been a long wearying day, and though sleep beckoned, news from home was like cool well water on a hot day.

After reading her letters and getting a good laugh at Buddy's—mostly a Crayola drawing of his little family—he propped his feet on his bunk with the three new chapters his most talented wife had sent.

Bless her pea-picking heart.



# Chapter Eight

Jules, with his darkie never more than a foot behind him, reached the bank an hour before its posted opening. Nothing to do but retreat to a patch of grass by the creek a quarter mile down the street and do what he hated.

Wait.

While the hobbled horses grazed, he found a spot under a live oak where he could keep an eye peeled.

Pretty fussed about trying to make him comfortable. It took too sharp of a word to get her to sit. She turned her back and took to sulking.

After a bit of icy silence, he leaned in close. "I'm sorry. I know you only want to help."

She turned toward him, tears overflowing. "Ya can whip me if ya want. I'll grab me a stick to bite. Won't make no sound at all."

"Hush now. Don't be silly. I'm not going to whip you. Not now, not ever."

The tears stopped. She wiped her cheeks then managed a smile, though not much of one. "If ya want, Masser, I can watch for the bank to open. I knows how a midmorning nap be highly prized by them what can afford one."

"You can see the front door from here?"

"Yes, sir. Pretty's got extra good peepers. Why Mammy says I can even see better than a hawk."

"A nap is tempting." He shimmied down a little more prone then raised back up on an elbow. "And listen. I don't want you calling me Master, my name will suffice. Do you understand?"

Her eyes widened, and her head went to bobbing a yes, but started making circles and turned into her shaking it no.

"Well, you can think on it while you watch the bank, and if you have any questions, I'll answer them when I awake." He folded an arm for a pillow and closed his eyes. "Pretty?"

"Yes, Mass . . . I means yes, Jules."

"Thank you."

"Ya welcome, sir."

Forty winks might be the exact ticket. No telling how far Galveston was or how long it would take to get there. Having only two horses would complicate things.

Traveling twenty miles for two or three days in a row, he'd have to either lie over or find fresh mounts.

"Jules?"

Without lifting his head or even opening his eyes, he grinned.  
“Yes.”

“Is it fine and dandy for me to call ya suh? I means, that don’t bother ya none, do it?”

“No, ma’am, won’t bother me at all. Sir’s alright but remember your R sound. Sir is good. Never hurts to show another human being respect. It’s actually a good habit, using sir and ma’am.”

Her skirt brushed his back, and he opened his eyes.

The slave patted her lap. “Ya can lay ya head right here, sir, and Pretty’ll wake ya right away soon as that door opens.”

Scooting to accommodate her, he rested his weary head onto the softness and welcomed a bit of slumber.

“Sir?”

A hand on his shoulder shook him slightly. He sat up. “What is it?”

“The bank door done opened.”

He wiped his eyes then rolled to his knees, but she beat him up and extended a hand.

“Let Pretty helps ya, sir.”

He did.

“Wants me to bring the horses ’round, sir?”

“Why yes, ma’am, please.” He dusted himself off then hurried up the street.

The man behind the teller’s cage greeted him, but Jules didn’t recognize him. “I need to withdraw my funds.”

“Very good, sir. Your name?”

“Julius Caesar Harris.”

The man nodded then disappeared around the half-opened vault door. Mustn’t let anyone see how many or few greenbacks filled its belly as his grandfather was wont to say. Why would he ever think to quote that monster?

The mere thought of him caused spittal to well until it about overflowed his mouth. How he’d enjoy hawking it in the loathsome man’s face.

But he’d prove himself better than that and remain a gentleman in every way.

The man returned and stuck out a piece of paper. “Sign here, sir.”

“Eighty-two dollars? Perhaps you didn’t understand. I wanted all of it.”

“That is all of it, sir. It’s all there is.”

“Three months ago, sir, I entrusted sixty double eagles to this bank’s care. Where are they?”

A shadow turned him around. The bank’s manager stood a few feet from him, wearing quite a forlorn expression. “Your mother,

who's approved to sign on the account, withdrew all but the eighty-two you see there."

Jules' cheeks flashed hot. "When was that?"

"The very next day, sir. Right after you deposited the gold. I distinctly remember she claimed you'd changed your mind and wanted the money."

He closed his eyes. What would his namesake do? Better yet, what would his father do? He filled his lungs, willed his voice calm, then tried to smile, though he doubted his mouth had much success for that effort.

"May I see the document she used to steal my money?"

The manager nodded, retreated to his office without an offer for Jules to follow—like he'd already fished out the withdrawal paper—then returned shortly. The banker extended the instrument of his ruination.

Her flowing signature, he'd know it anywhere. How could she? Worse than . . . shoddier . . . even viler than her worthless father. He whirled and put his John Hancock on the withdrawal slip, then the teller counted out the dollars. Without another word, he marched out.

Pretty, holding both horses' bridles, waited in the street outside the bank.

Tears threatened, but crying wouldn't help. Caesar had money troubles his whole life, but never the like of what Jules faced. "Did I see a livery on our way in this morning?"

"Yes, sir." She released one horse to point behind her. "Back yonder way."

"Come on, then, we need to sell these horses."

"But, sir. Why? Ain't we going to need them?"

He shook his head, then walked away, confident that she followed, but that was about all he was sure of. Which way should he go, and how could he get there? And of course, he'd brought Pretty along.

Every minute wasted meant they carried the sweetest heart in the whole United States farther away.

Oh, Pearl. Would he ever find her?



Pretty tugged on both reins. The mare she'd been riding came easily enough, but Jules' gelding . . . Calling her master by his given name soured in her mouth something awful. 'Masser' was so much



more comfortable.

Maybe he'd let her call him Mister Jules. Yes, sir. That'd be finer than an extra quilt on a cold night.

His horse proved plenty hardheaded, but the steel in his mouth did the trick.

What was afoot, she couldn't be sure of, but if he was selling the horses, her prayers might be fixing to get answered.

Only a fool would traipse across Texas without a mount.

Stopping, he turned and waited, then took the stubborn animal's reins. "Figure we might as well ride. We'll be walking soon enough." He swung into the saddle.

Though not as graceful as her young owner, she climbed aboard. He also didn't have a dress to be careful of either. She stayed a bit behind him. Didn't want to him to be seeing her smiling.

Had the banker man not given him his money? Could that be why he's going to sell the horses? Both of them?

Short of the livery, she spied a well off a ways with a right nice trough. Oh, Lord, getting a quick dunk would sure be fine. It looked big enough, and her Maker knew she'd be getting close to ripe.

Mammy didn't allow no stinking slaves around her kitchen. A pang stabbed her heart. Would she ever see her mother again?

Mister Jules jumped down all fancy like, without even bothering to put his foot in the stirrup, but she dismounted the regular way, ever mindful of her dress.

He held his hand out. "Give me her reins."

"Ya selling the saddles, too?"

He nodded, looking rather grim.

She retrieved his saddle bag and her flour sack full of what little larder remained, then rolled the extra clothes and the rest together. "Fine with you if I freshen up some over yonder at that well?" She threw a nod toward the water.

"Certainly, but don't be anywhere else. The owner might not be buying . . . or even here. Don't get out of sight."

"Yes, sir, Mister Jules."

The near-grown boy didn't seem to mind the Mister, or maybe selling the horses had him too distracted to notice. Either way, she'd find out later. Right that minute, she only wanted to be neck deep in that refreshing water.

Much as she'd like to skin off her dress, the trough offered little privacy, too exposed for naked bathing. Oooo, Mammy would skin her for sure if she ever found out she'd made a spectacle of herself.

Once there—and sure the coast was clear—she wiggled her unders off, fished out her piece of lye soap, then got in. Nothing like taking a long, hot soak back home, but still finer than double sifted flour. She

lathered and rinsed.

“Well now.” The deep voice jerked her head toward it. She grabbed the trough’s edge and pulled herself in a tight ball best she could.

“What have we got us here?” The colored man leading two mules grinned like he’d just found a silver dollar in the dust.

“Who are you?”

His laugh came from deep in his belly, shaking it good. “Better question is who you are, little miss. Best get on out of that trough, girly. I needs this stock to fill they bellies with some of that water, and they both bite.”

Tilting her head a bit, she checked to see if Mister Jules had come out of the livery. “Won’t ya please turn around, sir? I needs to put on my clean dress.”

“Ooowee. You bet I will, you calling me sir and all.” He faced his mules but kept talking. “Shy and pretty—second time in as many days.”

What did he mean by that? She jumped out, pulled her wet dress over her head, and slipped on the dry one in a flash.

“What’s ya name, gal?” The man asked without turning back. She sure appreciated him being a gentleman and providing a modicum more of privacy, blocking any view of her with his breadth and the animal’s bulk.

“Everyone calls me Pretty, but Mammy says for me to be thinking on a new one, on account of once I get old and gray like her, it aint’ gonna fit.” After wiggling into her unders, she smoothed everything out. “You can turn on back around now.”

He did. “You do favor that other ’un, but she’s more redbone.”

“What other ’un? Who you talking about?”

He brought the mules to water; she backed up out of nipping range.

“There’s a gal came through. They sold her down at the cockfighting barn night afore last.”

Could it be? “That man what sold her, what’d he be looking like?”

The darkie stood right there and described the no good slaver who dragged Pearl through the mud.

“Had a wagon load of field hands he sold, too, but not the big mule skinner. Wouldn’t sell him, turned down three thousand, if ya can ’magine that.”

“The light-skinned gal, what’d she go for?”

“Better than two thousand. That ’un? Best auction I ever seen, so much fun. Me and the boss got us a good laugh that night. An old potbelly, pig-faced farmer wanted her bad, but the old lady refused to hush, outbid him every time. She’s the one ended up buying the little

miss. Good thing, too.”

“Did you know her? That woman who bought the gal?”

“Not sure of her name, but I seen her ’round town some. Don’t keep an animal here, so . . .” He shrugged. “Ya sure is curious. Think ya might know the little redbone gal?”

Scratching the closest mule’s forehead, she looked up at him.

“Maybe. Sounds something like my friend named Pearl.”

A familiar whistle sounded. Mister Jules waved her over.

Smiling at the slave, she grabbed her things then ran to the barn.

Oh, Lord. What is I going to do?



Jules studied on the girl as she came near. Had that man . . . “You fine? Anything happen while I was inside?”

“No, sir. Nothing ’cept I cleaned up.”

“You look rather peaked; sure that darkie didn’t bother you?”

“No, sir, Mister Jules. He just be taking care of them mules. Seemed nice enough. We visited some. Did I do something wrong?”

“No, ma’am.” He took his saddle bag from her. “Thanks. The depot is only two blocks over. We need to see when the stage for Galveston leaves.”

“Yes, sir. Did the liveryman trade right?”

“About as I expected, but then the seller is always at a disadvantage unless the buyer speaks first.”

She took two or four steps then scratched her head. “I think maybe I sees what you’re saying, but a part of me thinks maybe I don’t.”

For half a block, he explained it then elbowed her. “He made me an offer on you.”

“Oh, Masser! You wouldn’t sell me.” Eyes so wide he could see the whites all around, she pushed her hair behind her ears. “Would ya?”

“No. But I must admit to being tempted a bit when he reached nine hundred.”

She hurried to the front, whirled, then walked backward before him. “Sure enough? Nine hundred? That’s a powerful lot. You sure?”

He shook his head. “Yes, I was joshing you. Pretty, I wouldn’t sell you.”

She stopped then ducked her head and whispered something.

“What did you say?”

She looked up, filled her lungs, then hiked both shoulders. “There

be something I gots to tell.”



# Chapter Nine

What had she done? Pretty shook her head. Why had she opened her mouth? He'd said he weren't going to sell her. But no. She had to stack another straw on her own back. Exactly like Mammy said not to do.

Probably told her a hundred times; don't make things worse by speaking up.

"What is it, girl? Spit it out."

One might think she adamantly refused, watching her head dart side to side in short little jerks. "Ya grandpap . . . He done . . ." She closed her eyes and braced herself. Sure 'nuff, that time, he were going to slap her silly.

"What are you talking about? What did he do?"

She ducked her head and turned a bit, making a smaller target. "He gots me . . . uh . . . I's having a baby, sir."

"Look at me."

She waited a bit, then with a glance, stole a peek. Didn't look mad. She raised her head. "Ain't you going to smack me, Mister Jules?"

"No. Why would I? What do you think you've done?"

Both shoulders hiked, and she offered her best grin, the one Mammy had her practice. "Once I swell up, ya cain't get much for me, and I's thinking, maybe you only joshed about selling me. Seeing how . . ."

She backed away. "I figured you selling them horses 'cause the bank didn't have 'nuff money to buy Pearl at that auction."

"You're right about me not having enough money, but Pretty, selling you is not an option. Nor would I ever consider selling your child." He shooed her forward with a flip of both hands. "Now stop this nonsense. We need to get to Galveston."

"But why? If you don't have enough coin to buy her back?"

"I want to see who does. Maybe work a deal with that man."

"Oh." She turned and fell in behind him. She hated lying, but couldn't stand the thought of Pearl taking her new place. She loved being on the run, safe with Mister Jules. And best of all, she loved being away from . . . She spit.

Wasn't ever going to say or even think that monster's name again.

The stage driver said she could ride inside unless more folks got aboard along the way. She didn't much like racing down the road swaying from side to side, but the thought of having to get up on top about gave her the shakes.

At each stop, she hung back until the driver gave her a get-in nod.

Finally, the man blew his bugle and hollered Galveston. Hoped for sure she never had to do that again. Riding in a stage weren't no fun like she figured. But would Mister Jules be willing to stay there?

Once he couldn't find Pearl, he'd most likely want to skedaddle right out of Galveston.

No never mind. That day's cloudy skies and the breeze was nice, not nearly so hot as the one before.

She liked being so close to water, more than she'd ever seen. Heard tell about the Gulf of Mexico afore; wading her feet in its waves felt lovely. Never imagined a pond so big you couldn't see the other side.

What about a steamboat ride? That'd be something. All the field hands—house slaves, too—would be so jealous if they were to find out she'd done got herself a trip on a steamboat.

"Pretty?"

She snapped out of her daydreaming. "Yes, sir?"

"Come on. There's a hotel not too far from the auction house."

Snatching up her sack and his saddle bag, she hurried after him. One street over, he ducked into a big store, and she stayed right on his heels.

Mammy said some folks didn't allow darkies in their establishments, but apparently, that weren't one of them. After a few minutes of him walking around and looking at all the goods, she relaxed some.

Wouldn't her mother dash to the hen house and back for even half of them fancy pots and pans? Not to mention the meat grinders they sported.

"Here. You like this one?" He held out a brand spanking new dress.

"Oh, yes, sir. It's mighty pretty." She leaned forward as he held it to her shoulders.

"The blue looks good on you. That one you've got on is getting shoddy."

"Yes, sir. I be the third gal it got handed down to."

Folding the dress over his arm, he strolled over to a bin full of right nice-looking cotton unders.

"Pick out what you need."

New unders? Weren't he spending all his money? But then, he didn't need it for buying Pearl, on account of she weren't even in Galveston. He stepped forward and acted real interested in a fancy feathered hat.

She found a pair looked the right size real quick. "Don't want no hat, sir. Not one with a feather like that un'."

“Me either.” He grinned and ambled on. Found his own self a shirt and picked out a carpet bag.

Mercy! With her dress and unders, the bill cost him six whole dollars and two bits. Throwing money around like that, he’d probably be broke in a week, and she hated that thought, especially with the auction house so close.

Two dollars for a room for one night plus an extra quarter for her. How much did he sell them horses and saddles for? Kind of wished she’d paid more attention when he bought the stage tickets.

How much had they cost? She wanted to ask what supper cost, too, but didn’t dare.

Him eating in the main dining room, and her out back, she had no idea what it tallied.

That night in the fancy hotel room, the numbers swirled past her mind’s eye. She be good at ciphering with her fingers, but past them and her toes, almost impossible for her to keep track.

The notion of counting his money after he dozed off nipped at her, but if he woke up and caught her at it, he’d think she’s some kind of ingrate thief.

After fluffing his pillow good, she turned back the covers on the bed then faced him. “Needs me to fetch you anything?”

He looked at her over his book. “No, ma’am. You can turn in if you’re of a mind.”

“Wants me to warm your side some?”

“No, but put that extra pillow in the middle.”

“I can sleep on the floor, sir.”

“No need.”

In obedience, she slipped into the four poster.

“Pretty?”

Raising up on an elbow, she looked at him. “Yes, sir.”

“There was a hint of fall in the air today. We best find you a pair of shoes tomorrow.”

“Oh, no need, sir. I hates them things. They hurt my feet something dreadful.”

He laughed. “Not if we get you a pair that fits. We’ll also get you some wool stockings to keep your legs warm.”

“Yes, sir, if that’s what you want.” She eased back down.

Oh, dear Lord, don’t let him spend all his money. I don’t want to be sold.





Though Pearl never doubted her love searched for her, she remained totally unaware Jules and her best friend Pretty had passed within two blocks of her new home on their way out of Austin.

While master and slave scoured Galveston's auction houses and slave barns, she fell into a routine with her owner.

Except Miss Ruth didn't act her part too well. Seemed each day, the bond grew in Pearl's heart, but not until after the first real hint that winter would indeed come to south Texas, did her true affection bloom into full-blown love.

"Go ahead and pick the green ones, too, dear. My old bones are promising a freeze." Miss Ruth set her wooden slate basket down and rubbed her back.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You've been such a help, child. Never canned so much in all my days. If it does freeze, they'll be killing hogs. We might even pickle us some feet and ears."

Pearl held her apron higher and wrinkled her nose. "Mammy put up a lot of feet and ears, too, but I couldn't ever bring myself to try them." She shook her head. "Jules liked them, but not me."

"You didn't?"

"No, ma'am. I'm real partial to chops though. And bacon. Oh my, if they'd let me I'd eat my weight in bacon and eggs with thickening gravy."

"I'm partial to bacon myself."

"Oh, ma'am, pass another biscuit, please and thank you."

Miss Ruth chuckled. "Brother is taking me to the cockfights tonight. Would you like to come along?"

"I will gladly if you want me to, but I'd rather sit by the fire and read if it's all the same."

The older lady grinned. "Afraid I might lose and have to sell you to pay my losses?"

Pearl returned the mirth. If Miss Ruth would stop joshing about selling her off, her life would be about perfect, except for missing Jules so much.

"I don't have to worry about that. No doubt you can spot the best bird from that barn's rafters. I've seen you do it too many times."

A rather smug expression graced her wrinkled face. "It does help that brother and I know the handlers."

Pearl had heard it all before, and the thought of a night reading by the fire thrilled her more than getting out. She held her apron up. "Shall I carry these in and put some water on to boil, ma'am?"

"Please, then you can run to the market. I'm hankering to fry up a chicken. Oren loves the way I can get a breast well done without drying it out."

“Oh, yes, ma’am. I love your yard bird, too. How about I make some yeast-rising light bread.”

Miss Ruth nodded. “My chicken, your rolls, fried green tomatoes, and . . .”

“Boiled okra! And . . .” She gestured toward her benefactor.

“Yams.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Pearl made a big show of licking her lips then hurried to get it all done. No, not ever would she slow walk Miss Ruth.

Thank the Lord, Mammy had never been one to shirk or allow any of her charges to either. Right after Pretty went to the master’s bed, that girl tried, but even then, Mammy wouldn’t have it, especially with her own blood.

Do your work as unto the Lord. That’s what the old woman drummed into all the house help.

Jules was the same. Whatever he took on, he did it with a vengeance. He’d read about a thing in a book, then went right about doing it. Even learned how to fix the old hall clock from a book he sent off for.

Staring at his image in her mind’s eye a minute, she pushed her beloved’s face away and concentrated on chores.

No daydreaming allowed either.

She loved shopping. For whatever. Didn’t matter. She even had greenbacks of her very own if she wanted to buy something. All the regular vendors knew she was Ruth Worthington’s girl and extended whatever credit she needed.

A fat hen and ten pounds of fine flour with only a glance here and there, taking note of anything interesting. Then she was headed home.

Few steps past the last push cart, right there bigger than that monster boar they butchered last fall, the pig-looking man who’d wanted to buy her leaned against a brick wall in the alley between the two buildings.

Her heart almost quit on her. She veered to the middle of the street, dodging a wagon loaded with cotton bales.

Glancing over her shoulder, she cringed. The farmer showed his teeth in what looked something like an evil smile. Hideous! Even from that far, she could see his leer.

Mister Oren showed right on time. What single gentleman of a certain age—as Miss Ruth often could be heard saying—ever passed up a home cooked meal with two beautiful women?

Soon she forgot all about the pig-man and enjoyed the meal. Right nice to be treated like family and eat with the white folks—not that she truly had that much negro blood flowing through her veins.

After the second glance at his pocket watch, Pearl took the hint,

stood, and went to stacking dishes.

“I’ll wash. You ladies can dry and stack. I hate hunting the exact right spot to put a serving spoon.”

Pearl set the stack down and held her hands out toward Mister Oren. “Oh no, sir. You and Miss Ruth go on. I’m staying by the fire tonight, so I can have all this done in no time. No need for you to bother.”

He held up a make-believe hammer. “Going, going, going, gone.” He gaveled the arrangement final. “Talked me into it, Missy. Sister been teasing you too much about selling you off?”

She gave him her what-are-you-talking-about smile. “Have you got another sister I don’t know?”

“Pearl, you ever save enough to buy your freedom, come see me. We’ll read the law together. You’re a natural.”

Through the whole of putting the kitchen back in perfect order, she toyed with the notion of being a respected member of the bar and fighting for the rights of people.

Something made her a bit uneasy, being there all alone. But it hadn’t in the past. Could something be afoot?

With a second round to double check both doors and all the windows, she filled hers and the parlor’s oil lamps, retrieved her book, then eased into the chair that had become hers—at least when only she and Miss Ruth sat in the parlor of an evening.

Thirty pages or so into her story, a chill sent her to the kitchen’s wood box. The silly thing was totally empty. Only her own self to blame. Miss Ruth saw to it the wood shed stayed full, but the kitchen’s box was Pearl’s responsibility.

She’d let it run out.

Nothing to do but throw on her coat and bring in three or four armloads.



# Chapter Ten

Seven right nice slabs. Pearl wanted another, but the post oak the wood seller brought the last time proved heavier than the last purchase of red. She secured her load with her right hand and headed back in.

At the porch's first step, a shadowy blur leaped toward her from the corner of the house. A hand grabbed her arm.

A scream sounded.

The wood went flying.

Another hand covered her mouth.

Almost as though her foot remembered on its own, she kicked the attacker between the legs, exactly like Jules had made her practice.

The man groaned and stumbled backward.

As fast as her legs would carry her, she ran inside, whirled and locked the door, then ran straight to Miss Ruth's room and grabbed the Derringer kept in the lady's bedside table. Fishing a match out of her pocket with trembling fingers, she lit the oil lamp.

Soon as it glowed, she thought better of it and rolled the wick down. She ran around to the far corner and pressed her back into it against climbing roses wallpaper.

Her heart boomed like a drum.

A horrible bang echoed from the kitchen downstairs. Splintering wood; shattering glass. She wanted to crawl under the bed, but that wouldn't do.

What had Jules told her?

Face her fears.

She held her ground.

Footfalls creaked on the stairs then in the hall—each one louder than the las. Weighed so heavy on her chest, she could barely breathe.

He was coming.

She held the little gun out.

Kicked full force, the door slammed open. He stopped in its frame, silhouetted against the downstairs' light. "Well now. There you are."

The pig man!

"Get out, or I'll shoot."

"That little thing won't hurt much, nothing more than a bee sting. I got tough hide, little lady. Put it down."

He took a step toward her. Then a second. "I been dreaming about you, gal. Was going to take you to my bed, but this one here will work just fine." He floated toward her like in a dream.

Wait! Wait!

She had to let him get closer.

Then he was there.

She squeezed the trigger.

The Derringer flashed in the darkness. It boomed—much louder than anticipated. The air stank. Piggy took one more step toward her then stumbled backward.

He glared. “Why you little . . .” He lunged toward her.

She pulled the trigger again.

The other barrel exploded.

The man grabbed his chest then fell to the floor.

Pearl stood there, holding the gun on him. Why hadn’t she got more bullets? He moaned. His leg kicked at her. She pulled the trigger again, but nothing happened. She squeezed again.

Nothing!

Scrambling over the bed, she opened the side table’s single drawer, rummaging frantically for more ammunition. She had to reload. Praise God! Found it. She spilled the box onto the bed and grabbed two bullets. She studied the little pistol.

What did she do first? How did she get them in there?

The pig moaned then gasped. On hands and knees, she eased toward the bed’s end. He lay there like a pile of dirty laundry, still as a pond on a breezeless day. Couldn’t see any breathing n.

Had she killed him?

Oh, Lord! She’d gone and murdered a man. A white man. Hell fire and damnation awaited her in the afterlife; a noose in the one she was living. They’d string her up for sure. She’d never see Jules again.

Oh, Jules. She slumped onto the bed and closed her eyes.

Lord, have mercy.

Tears erupted. Why hadn’t she remembered to fill the wood box? If she’d never gone out, he’d still be alive. If only she’d never written that note, she’d be back home with Jules. That horrible man would never even have laid eyes on her. She was doomed.

Ruined.

“Pearl? Pearl!” Sounded like Miss Ruth calling from way off. Someone hurried up, pounding the stairs. “Where are you, child?”

Though she wanted to answer with all her heart, but her mouth refused words. Tears overflowed and mixed with liquids dripping from her nose.

Someone touched her head.

“Sweet Lord!” The pistol left her death grip. “Get up, child. We’ve got to rouse the neighbors and tell the law I shot this intruder!”

“What are you talking about, Ruth? I’ll fetch the sheriff or one of his deputies.” Mister Oren’s strong voice comforted Pearl.

“No, Brother. You get on home. We’ll wait a bit then rouse them. I

was about to turn in when this idiot decided he'd lived long enough. Help her up. I'll fetch the whiskey. A stiff drink will bring her around."

On her feet with Mister Oren's arm around her back, under her arms, his strength spread into her. "I shot him, Miss Ruth. Not you. Can't let you take the blame."

The old sweetie patted her cheek. "Don't ever say that again, darling. I shot this idiot. They hang slaves for killing a white man. No nevermind what he was trying to do. I'll be fine. It killed him that I outbid him. Don't you see?"

Pearl filled her lungs. Miss Ruth was right. She nodded agreement. What else could she do? The lady owned her. In obedience, Pearl had to abide by her wishes.



Evelyn would have liked it better if Miss Pearl had been reading out loud. It would have been nice to tie the reactions with exactly where she read in the chapter.

She finished the last page then looked up. "Yes, ma'am. That's exactly how it happened, but I didn't like it one bit."

"You didn't? I'm sorry. What should I change?"

"Not a word. What I didn't like was how you put me right there—in Miss Ruth's bedroom again. Why, I smelled the burned powder. Like I'd relived it. Awful night that was. Praise God for the Blood."

"Oh. Well. I am sorry for you, but that's what my readers love. It is good, isn't it? But Miss Pearl, are you sure about telling this part? There's no statute of limitations on murder."

"Self-defense, pure and simple. Best of all, I'd love clearing the name of that dear woman. The farmer's family raised a stink on account of him getting shot twice and his seeds being so swollen from where I kicked him."

"Was there a trial?"

"No, honey. Took the grand jury less than ten minutes to no-bill her."

A twinge of regret nipped at Evelyn, but two trials in one book might be too much. "I'll leave it as is then. It's so awesome that Miss Ruth took up for you."

"God rest her soul. More I thought about it, all the better I loved her. Did you know our Ann—who, by the way, is still doing great—was Miss Ruth's grandniece?"

“I didn’t. That’s something. I love how we’re all tied together. It’s a small world indeed.”

The ex-slave grinned. “Just like the Lord.”

“Amen.”

“When can I read the next chapter?” Miss Pearl wrinkled her nose, and her dimples twinkled.

Had she been making that gesture her whole life? Was it one of the reasons Jules fell in love with her?

“Nevermind. I probably ought to skip that one anyway. Hard enough telling you. Don’t really want to relive that part again.”

“I’ll understand if you don’t, but I’m halfway finished with my edits, then I’ll retype it.”

“Can’t help you there, dear. These old fingers couldn’t stand it, pounding on one of those machines day and night.”

“It keeps my mind occupied. I’m very thankful for the opportunity to tell your story. I’m anxious to get to the queen part when life wasn’t so difficult for you.”

The wall clock caught Evelyn’s eye.

“Mercy. Time’s getting away from me. I promised Buddy we’d go to the train station. His father is due any day now, and he wants to be there. Not that I don’t.”

The old lady grinned. “If it wasn’t off in the wrong direction, I’d go with you and join in your celebration. I hope he makes it today.”



Jules liked Lincoln, but him beating Douglas split the country like he’d never dreamed possible. Grown men talked secession openly.

By Thanksgiving, what little there was of it, he decided he was tilting at windmills. Several knew of the slaver and his giant muleskinner, but he hadn’t been seen in a coon’s age or longer.

The first day of December, he boarded the Steamer New Orleans heading northeast for the ship’s namesake. As he sailed away, a cloud settled over his heart. Could it be that he’d never see his love again? If war did come, what would he do?

He hated slavery, yet he owned one. To hear Pretty tell it, a whole plantation full of them.

Some investigation into that might be prudent. And he loved Texas, but each day in the Lone Star State, he wondered if his mother’s vindictive father had accused him of thievery or worse.

If arrested and taken back to the Cypress Springs jail house, how could he prove he owned the horses and Pretty?



Worst of all, how was he going to make a living? His wallet got slimmer by the day. If the stories he'd heard proved true, he had relatives in Virginia—his father's people.

Hopefully, one of them would give him a job of some kind or at the least, know someone who would.



Sometimes Pretty hated herself for not telling Mister Jules about Pearl getting sold in Austin. He'd be so sad, but he kept that pillow between his lonely self and her every single night. About drove her mad.

Her love for him swelled like her belly. No wonder Pearl sang his praises at any and every opportunity.

Poor fellow worked hard in Galveston, hunting for Pearl. Good thing he found that boarding house and arranged getting the room and board for her helping clean and wash all day while he hunted the sales barns and auction houses.

Pretty took pride in making him a place. If not for that separating pillow and the constant nag about her not telling what she knew, it'd be a right nice situation.

Ooowee, she sure did love riding that steamboat better than the stage.

The big sidewheel sloshing the water fascinated her. Pushing itself along so smooth and silky, day and night—even while she slept—the ship sped toward New Orleans. She'd always wanted to go to the city.

Mammy told stories of her time there. Slaves had rights in Louisiana. Got Sundays off, no matter what! Were a law, she said. Even if the cotton needed picking, first day of the week, no darkies worked.

Right nice law if you asked Pretty.

That first night after supper when it came time to turn in, a thing dawned on her.

Instead of a big ol' four poster, there be only one skinny bunk and one pillow. He sat the little table, studying on the old pocket watch he'd bought a few days back in Galveston.

"Think you can fix it?"

Looking up, he grinned. He ain't been smiling all that much of

late, and her heart twisted for his sadness. If only he'd forget Pearl and feel them feelings for Pretty.

"Should be able to. I've got it down to where it only loses two minutes an hour."

"That's good. You're so smart, I figured you could all along. Why, it weren't even running last I heard." She sat on the bunk, close, but not too. He hated her smothering him.

"It wasn't running. Remember your grammar."

"Yes, sir. So how'd you get it going?" That sounded right. She hated him correcting the way she talked all the time.

How could she remember all those right ways to say things?

But she'd have to if he was ever going to love her, so she worked hard at it and practiced under her breath.

Sometimes when she spoke though, wrong 'uns just popped out.

"It needed a new mainspring, but the timing wheel is off. I've been adjusting it, but it's a delicate operation. It's getting close."

She asked enough about this and that—ever careful of her words—to keep him talking. She loved the sound of his voice. But soon as she ran out of questions, he went back to tinkering with the watch. She scooted back and leaned against the wall with her hand on her belly.

Of late, seemed her back ached more than if she'd picked her weight in lint.

After not too long, her eyelids grew heavy. "Mister Jules, sir?"

He looked at her.

"Fine with you if I lays it down?"

"Yes, of course. Scoot close to the wall as you can. There's not much bed for us to share."

"Want me to make a pallet?" Why did she have to go and say something stupid like that?

"No, liable to be a cold night, and they didn't give us that much cover."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." She eased down, grateful there weren't no extra pillow anywhere in sight.

Both nights at sea, he came to bed after she were asleep and got up before her. About broke her heart. What was wrong with her? He seemed to like touching her belly, feeling the baby kick and move around in there.

Tickled her how he kept asking on how his uncle was doing. But that was the only place he laid his hands on her.

Truth be known, she hoped for an aunt her own self. Whatever popped out, though. Bound to be redbone, might even be able to pass. Wouldn't that be something? Her having a white baby.

Still be a slave though; she and her baby girl.

New Orleans were a great place to be, 'cept only he didn't care to stay long. Ended up trading the watch he fixed all perfect for three broke ones. Could he make enough tinkering with timepieces to feed hisself and her?

Maybe once he lit somewhere, he could rent her out to work some nice lady's house. Sure hoped it wouldn't be as a field hand.

She could help him spread the word that he could fix about anything.

The man proved to be a wonder with gears and springs and such. He were so smart, and at only seventeen, mighty able at taking good care of her. She would see to it she would take the best care of him she could.

The train weren't nearly as nice as the steamboat, but what she hated worst about it, she couldn't stay with Mister Jules. They made her ride in the stinking cattle car. Thing went so fast, it were a wonder it didn't flip over at every turn.

At least he refused to let them chain her like the other darkies in there.

The good Lord never intended for human beings to fly, especially on the ground. But that's exactly what the steel monster did. And the noise. She hated them metal wheels clinking and clacking on them iron rails constantly, day and night.

At Richmond in Virginia, she got to get off the beast for a few precious hours. Jules told her another train would take them on the same day.

How far away was Texas? Would she ever see Mammy again? Pretty missed sharing her pregnancy with her.

At least it took less time to get to Fredericksburg where it stopped next, but she didn't get to get off there. The train chugged on to Hartwood, where Mister Jules claimed his pap came from.

Said he still had people there. What would they think? Probably that he'd made the baby. Well, she was finally able to trust Jules would do right by her.

One thing, Pretty sure hoped he could find them. It seemed past time to light somewhere so she'd have some days to get everything set for the little one. Hopefully, the little booger could wait until spring.

Be nice to miss a week or two of planting time with her belly growing so big.

She'd almost quit worrying over Pearl and not telling Mister Jules the whole truth.

Was that good? Or real bad?

Didn't make much difference since him and Pretty's all the way to Virginia.



# Chapter Eleven

A big fat locomotive belched thick smoke. Buddy pulled his hand free and raced toward the tracks.

“Broderick.”

He slowed.

“Eversole.”

He stopped dead in his tracks. She never let him do anything. He wasn’t going to get on the tracks or anything.

“Nightingale. You get yourself right back here and hold my hand.”

His shoulders slumped, and he turned around, trudging back to his mother. “Please, Mama. Can’t we hurry? Daddy’s on that train. Right?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. He’ll be here when he’s here.”

How many times had she told him that? He wagged his head back and forth. “And not one minute sooner.”

She picked him up. “Watch your tone, young man, or . . .” Her eyebrows raised, and she cocked her head. “If I say so, your daddy will take you to the woodshed.”

Wrinkling his nose, he smiled. “No, Mother. I’ll be gooder. Can we please hurry and go see now?”

“Yes, dear. But you need to be patient, Buddy. It’s a virtue. You can wait.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m waiting as fast as I can.”

With his hand squeezing hers, he matched her long strides with double time, just like the soldiers did marching to fight. Finally, the huge train stopped next to the boards. He watched intently, searching every passenger’s face, every single one as they got off, and no daddy in the whole bunch. It hurt his heart.

“When’s the next one, Mama?”

Looking both directions, she retrieved a piece of paper from her coat pocket. “There’s only one more today, and it should arrive in about an hour.”

How could he ever wait that long? Anyway, he didn’t even know what a virtue was.

But he knew he hated waiting. He closed his eyes and tried to picture the big clock in the parlor, but he couldn’t see it clear or tell how long that would be. “It takes six minutes to make an hour, right?”

“Sixty minutes, Son. Ten times six.”

“Oh.” He pulled her toward a bench, freed his hand, and climbed up onto it. “We can wait right here, and I’ll be gooder than gold, right? That’s a virtue?”

At least, he made her laugh.

“Want a cookie? Miss Helen sent us some.”

“Oh, yes, please and thank you.”

Slow and easy, he nibbled the edges, careful to not gobble like he really wanted to do. Because that would make it be gone in two minutes. The sack carried more, but she might not give him another.

Make it last. Mind his manners. Say please and thank you.

He'd do it all if she'd give him that little sack.

A lady strolled across the depot's big porch Mama called a platform and stopped right next to the post holding up the roof.

Maybe she had a soldier coming home, too. He stared at her for a while, then when he was positive, he bumped his mother's arm with his shoulder. He smiled at her then nodded toward the lady.

“She's pretty, but not as beautiful as you, Mama.”

His mother crossed her finger up and down over her lips. “Shhh.” But then she grinned real big and leaned in. “Thank you, darling. You're too sweet, and I love you, but that young woman is gorgeous, and I'm getting old.”

What a fun game; he liked it. “No, Mama. Daddy is old now, but you're my young and beautiful mother.”

“Well, he is nine years older than me, but I turn thirty-nine this year, that's getting pretty long of tooth.”

Wrinkling his nose, he studied hers a minute then shook his head. “You have pretty teeth, too. I don't see any long ones. We scrub our teeth every morning together, and night times, too, before we go to bed. I ain't never seen a long tooth.” His lips spread wide, he won.

“Buddy, you know ain't is not in the dictionary. It isn't even a word. Besides, it sounds dreadful.” She wasn't old, not compared to his daddy. “I brought your tablet. Want to draw?”

That would be fun. He scooted back on the bench and held his hands up. She folded the pages back to a clean one, covered his legs with it, then handed him three crayons, purple and red and orange.

“Where the rest?”

“I've got them but use those first, and when you're through with one, we can trade for whatever color you want next.”

First, what should he draw? He thought about drawing the lady by the post, but then Mama might be mad. He already had so many of his daddy, too. He could draw another train, but he'd need the black. He loved the engines, but the cabooses were good, and he had a red.

With the purple colored stick's point touching the page near the bottom, he drew a neat line from one side to the other.

“What's that?”

Couldn't she tell?

“The track. I'm going to draw a caboose, and it needs two of those

guys for its wheels to run on.”

“Oh.”

She stopped asking questions and buried her nose in a book while he worked. He checked, and it didn't have any pictures in it. So it wasn't one of her special MayMee's Pirate story books he couldn't touch yet.

That time he colored in one, she almost cried. He sure did like those guys. Red Rooster was the best.

But she must be reading some ol' grownup story. He went back to his picture. After three crayon trades, he about had it perfect. He leaned back and eyed it hard.

She pointed at the page. “Who's that driving the train?”

“My old man.”

“You know I don't like you calling him that.”

“That's what he says he am. You heard him say it. He wrote it in his letters, too. ‘Son, you pray for your old man.’ ” Before she could argue, a giggle slipped out.

Then a faint chug silenced her. She looked up the tracks.

White smoke rose over the treetops. A long, loud whistle sounded.

Whistles never lied!

He jumped to his feet, spilling the two colors in his lap. The engine came into view, belching more white smoke and blowing its whistle again.

As its wheels brought it along the tracks toward the depot, he itched to run over to the edge, but danced in place. “He's here! Get up, Mama! Come on. Daddy's home!”

Picking up the Crayolas and folding his tablet shut, she gathered the stuff into her bag. Had to mark her last page with the bookmark Daddy sent all the way from France across the ocean.

“Hurry, Mama.”

Scooping him up like a baby prone to run off, she gave him the eye. “Patience.”

“My virtue done flew the coop.” He grinned. He loved making her smile, and playing like virtue was a hen did the trick.

Her eyes twinkled when she did. She poked her book into the bag with her free hand, slung it over her other shoulder, then carried him to the platform's edge. He loved her so much.

But he'd like her even better if she didn't treat him like such a baby. She was so soft though and cuddly, too. Plus, he could see lots gooder from up there.

Still, nothing like riding on his daddy's shoulders.

The train slowed, belched one long, last bunch of smoke. Heads started popping out windows. He searched along, dismissing that soldier, looking to the next. They looked the same all wearing their

uniforms.

And it had been so long. Where was he? He had to be on that train.

Then he spotted him. He didn't look like all the rest. He was Daddy, and Buddy would know him anywhere, hanging out the window, waving, and hollering. Had the biggest smile he about ever saw.

Mama must have spied him, too. She squealed like a little girl. Buddy covered his ears. What was she crying for?

Daddy was home!

Taking her face in his hands, he held her and looked into her eyes. "Mama! What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"These are happy tears, baby." She wiped her cheeks, but more tears kept running down them. "Very happy tears. Your daddy's home."

Yes, he was! She sat Buddy down on the boards, and they waited . . . the longest virtue ever . . . watching Daddy walk to the door through the windows.

Finally, he made it to the door and flew towards him and Mama with his arms open wide. He wrapped her up, and Buddy wrapped up his leg, hugging with all his might.

They were kissing when he looked up. He yanked on his father's belt, and he grinned down at Buddy then lifted him by one arm onto his hip. He loved being in the middle of their hug.

Soon as the squeezing stopped, he patted the old man's cheeks, and his dad tousled his hair and patted his back, hugging him again every few minutes.

More kisses and hugs flowed what seemed like an hour. Him being home, at last, made Buddy tingle all over with happiness. He'd missed his old man so much when he went across the ocean to pray with the soldiers.

All the way back to the big house in the cab car, Buddy sat his lap while Mama pressed in so hard, he thought she might smother him.

But Daddy didn't seem to care a bit. He was so big and strong, he wouldn't get squashed.



Easing the door shut, the love of Nathaniel's life slipped back into bed and snuggled close. He silently praised God for that simple joy and wrapped his arm around her. "How's our little man doing?"

"Fine, he's sleeping like a baby."

"Hey, speaking of babies. He asked me about his little brother,



said you said talk to me about that.”

She laughed. “What’d did you tell him?”

“That we’d talk about it.” Oh, how he loved her giggles.

“Excellent. So let’s talk.”

The topic could never come up far as he was concerned. He had no desire to talk about it. About killed him when their daughter was stillborn—as much over his beloved’s grieving as losing his baby girl.

Then the pain and trouble she had delivering Buddy . . .

“Say, why didn’t you send me the rest of your new story? You left me hanging. ”

“That’s my job. Got to keep you readers turning pages. Where’d you leave off?”

“Jules and Pretty are in Virginia, and Pearl is here in Austin.”

“Ah, guess the last chapters didn’t get there before you left.” She traced his forehead then twirled his hair around a finger. “And don’t you think for a minute that I failed to realize you’re changing the subject.”

“Was I?”

“Don’t you even . . . You know you were. What about Buddy’s little brother?”

“Let’s pray about him.”

“I have been, haven’t you? The Word says children are a blessing.”

“I know, but it also says there’s a time for all things.”

She fell silent like debating with herself what would be her best argument. After a long pause, she whacked his head playfully. “I sent the rest of the manuscript at least two weeks before you sailed. Should have had time to get there.”

“Things were wild after the war. Who was staying? Who was going? Where and when? A madhouse. Bless the Lord, I got to leave when I did.”

“Amen to that. Did you get the chance to mark up the chapters you read?”

“As always, and I even caught a misspelled word.”

“I doubt it.” She snickered.

“Light that lamp there, and I’ll show you, Missy.”

Turned out she was right, but to soothe his wounded pride, she got him the rest of her manuscript. He loved the way she told a story. Loved reading in bed with her looking over his shoulder, ready to defend any mark he might make on her neatly typed words.



The folks of Hartwood, Virginia, welcomed Jules with open arms once they found out he was John Harris' only son. Seemed the whole town loved his father and hated hearing of his demise.

While the nation debated slavery, he settled in with his uncle Peter and cousins. He loved the sense of family they gave him. They all worked harder than the field hands at Live Oaks and played even harder.

Never dreamed he had a knack for picking a fiddle.

Took to growing tobacco, too. The family's main cash crop grew tall and lush and flowered like cotton. Best of all though, he learned he had a nose for sniffing out the best leaves.

By spring of '61—right about the time General Beauregard fired on Fort Sumter—he used the last of his coin to buy a right nice load of prime tobacco from a neighbor's curing barn then pocketed a tidy profit taking it to Washington.

The neighbor said he knew for a fact as a slave owner Jules would never get out of the nation's Capital alive. He suspected otherwise, and it proved true.

That spring and summer, he made five more trips north selling tobacco and bringing back shot powder and long rifles. All that stopped after news from the battle of Bull Run reached Hartwood.

Even though by then he owned two slaves, Pretty and her baby girl, how could he fight for the Confederacy?

One by one, his cousins signed up. How could he ever take up arms against them? He could no more fight for the Union and take up arms against family and friends.

Unlike the general consensus, he didn't see the war ending quickly. His cash box overflowed with gold coin, but he didn't expect he'd be allowed to keep on trading in Washington—or anywhere else not already glutted with tobacco.

By the first of September, he'd make up his mind.

His last night in Hartwood, after supper, he put his uncle's fiddle in its case before he really wanted and sought out Pretty. He found her and the little one in the kitchen.

She finished up with the supper dishes while the little cutie, tied into a chair, banged spoons together and sang in her own adorable way.

Untying the knot, he freed the baby then lifted her high over his head, making her laugh and squeal. "You about done?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's something I need to tell you."



# Chapter Twelve

Pretty glanced at Mister Jules but kept her hands in the wash tub. "Yes, sir. Do I have time to finish?"

"Sure, go ahead. We'll be in our room."

"Yes, sir."

She didn't like his tone. For sure he'd been struggling over something, but he wouldn't take any of her hints to let her in on his musings. Were he wanting to go back to Texas? Could that be what he'd been pondering on? Against all hopes, she prayed it weren't to find Pearl. Why, she was long gone and out of his life.

What if he'd decided to sell her and the baby after all? He'd been making good coin with his trading, but maybe he'd done gone and wagered it all away or something else stupid. Could he have lost what he'd worked so hard making?

Her ruminating over his topic of conversation slowed down the chore at hand.

Finally finishing up, she poured out the wash water, put the tub away, and took a slow turn around the kitchen. Everything was in place; even had it all ready for coffee to be boiled come morning.

Hanging her apron on its peg, she went to see what it were that had him in such a funk.

Once behind the closed door, she stopped. He cradled the baby in the crook of his arm and rocked her ever so gentle. She loved how he cared so much for her girl.

A body would think with little Poppy being his granddaddy's child, he'd hate her, but no. Not her Jules. Whole other way around; the man loved Pretty's little flower.

"Way you acts with her, folks all around keeps insisting she be your own blood."

"Well, she is." He grinned then gazed on her tiny face again. "She is my Auntie."

If only Poppy was his daughter, but . . . "What were it you wanted to tell me?"

"I'm leaving in the morning. Joining up with the Union Army."

"What? Why?" Of all her ponderings, she never once thought he'd do such a thing as that. "What's going to come of me and Poppy?"

"When did you name her that? What happened to Beautiful?"

"It weren't a real name." She held her hands up like she could block his declaration, make it untrue. She didn't want to talk about names, not right then. "What about us? What can we do? Where will we go? You ain't setting us free, is ya?"

“I don’t want to own you.”

She threw herself at his feet. Tears streamed over her cheeks. “We don’t want to be free, Masser Jules!”

He filled his lungs then exhaled. Instead of a grammar lesson like he usually gave her when she butchered the King’s English, he only shook his head. “Pretty, don’t call me that.”

“I’s sorry, sir. I won’t never do it again.” She wiped her nose with her sleeve. “Ya ain’t going to sell us, is ya, sir?”

“Uncle said you and the baby are welcome here with him for however long I’m gone. Says you’re better than most of his field hands and don’t eat near what most do.”

Tears overflowed his own eyes. His talk about leaving hurt her heart, and he never meant to do that.

“Cain’t we go with you? Won’t be no bother. Don’t that army needs cooks and someone to boil they laundry? Me and the baby can eat leftovers. Won’t cost ya no cash at all.”

“No, Pretty. You’ll be safe here. You’re related to most of the darkies, and these are my people. I couldn’t stand it if something happened to you or my Aunt Pie. How about Pie? Everyone loves sweet apple pie.”

She wiped her cheeks. About the silliest thing she’d ever heard, naming a sweet baby girl Pie. “I’ll think on it. But a poppy is a pretty little red flower, and I likes red. Knew a Sweetie Pie once. Maybe she could be your Auntie Sweetie Pie?”

A giggle escaped.

“There’s a happy laugh. Really. You stay here.” He shook his head and raised his off foot. “Pull these boots off. I’m leaving first light. But I’ll be back.”

She pulled off his boot, then the other one, too, hoping against hope he wouldn’t keep that pillow between them on his last night there. Might be the last one she’d ever have with him. She’d been hearing how many soldiers was dying.

If only . . .

Should have told him about Pearl, but it were too late then. He’d brought her all the way to Virginia, and now he was leaving her, running off to join the war.

Enough to make a body want to spit if she weren’t so sad.



Evelyn reached across the table and put her hand on his. He tore

his eyes off the page and grinned. She mouthed I love you then turned serious. "Hey, I've got a question for you about the story."

"Sure." He leaned back and took a sip of his coffee.

"What do you think about Jules keeping that pillow between him and Pretty all that time? He wasn't a believer yet. Do you think it's too far-fetched?"

"Love is a powerful motivation. The only night I ever spent in a bordello, I lost my clothes, but not my virginity."

"So you don't have any problems with it? You think it rings true?"

"No problems at all. What did Miss Pearl tell you about it?"

"Oh, she insists that's the way it was. But wouldn't she need to believe that? Suffice it to say I've had my doubts. It needs to be believable, and I don't know. I thought about skipping over their sleeping arrangements, but it's—"

"Hold it. You're not about to tell me some of the story are you?"

She scrunched her shoulders and gave him her best little girl grin. "Maybe." Where was he anyway? Leaning in a bit, she read the chapter heading. "What do you think of the battle scenes?"

"Realistic, with lots of blood and guts."

"I wrestled with putting so much in, but I want men to read my books, too."

Both his eyebrows hiked toward his hairline. "Plus, the woman can skip right over all that boring war stuff to get on along to the good parts."

"Exactly." She patted his hand. "And speaking of bordellos."

"Were we?"

"Yes, sir. You brought it up. In one of his letters, Robert told Helen that you were seen pretty frequently outside of a house of ill repute. Think that's a good place for a chaplain to be?"

"Definitely. Yes, ma'am. I was there on numerous occasions and blessed to have led seven of the soiled doves to the Lord. Major Carpenter ordered me to cease and desist on account of it hurting the troops' morale. But how could I?"

"Mercy, Nathaniel. A direct order? Can he do that? I mean you are the spiritual leader in his battalion."

"He's the major, sweetheart. He can do whatever he wants, but I'd rather face court martial. I refused. Told him right out he'd have to throw me in the brig to stop me from preaching the Gospel wherever and whenever the Lord led."

"I hear you." She smiled. "Helen was all concerned about telling me, but I figured that's why you were there and told her as much. Seven souls won for the Kingdom. Hurt the men's morale, did you?"

"Not all soldiers are whoremongers."

Little footfalls stopped the conversation.

“Hey! There you am! I so glad you home.” Buddy flung himself at his father, who caught him in the air. “Been missing my old man.”

So had she. Yes, sir. So had she.

Her hero brought his son around and plopped him in his lap.

“How’s my best boy this fine day?”

“Gooder than gold and ready to go. Can we get a pony today? I want one like mama had when you taught her to ride.”

He kissed her baby’s cheek then turned him around. “Don’t know about buying one, but we might find a stable where we could get you a ride.”

“I was six when I got Twinkle Toes. Maybe in a couple of years.”

Buddy whooped, jumped down, and did his war dance, the one he had perfected after he found out he was part Comanche. “I want a pony! I want a pony!”



After a stop to buy him a new cowboy hat, Nathaniel headed for the stable. No ponies though, but his boy proved fearless. The plucky little fellow had no qualms riding a full-sized horse. He loved it.

His sweetest heart almost had a stroke when he stepped away and let Buddy go on his own. He joined her at the corral’s fence.

“You sure about this? He hasn’t been on a horse in months and never without someone right there beside him. He’s only four, and barely at that.”

“He’ll be fine. It’s in his blood.” He bumped her shoulder with his. “Besides, that mare’s twenty-two years old. She’s had thousands of children on her back.”

“Still, he’s so little to be so high up there.”

“Relax, baby. Look at him. He’s in hog heaven.”

Without taking eyes off his little man, he slipped his hand into hers. “When do you think we might hear from your editor?”

“Which one?”

More than one? He glanced down and drank in her face. How blessed he was she’d insisted so young that he wait for her. The beauty convinced him when she’d told him, ‘I’m worth waiting for,’ and she certainly was.

“How many do you have?”

“None—yet—for this story. I’ve sent the first chapter and a synopsis to three different publishers. Figure we could see who’s willing to pay the most.”

“Awesome. What are we willing to take?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Baker and Taylor may not even make an offer. But I thought why not try and see what the new houses might give for it.”

“Who’s that?”

“Harcourt, Brace & Howe. Are we in need of money?”

“Well, I’d like to spend some. If you agree, of course. I’d like to buy a tent, truck, and travel trailer.”

She fell silent as Buddy urged his steed into an easy trot. Finally, she shoulder-bumped him back.

“I’ve been praying more along the lines of us finding a little church where you could pastor, but if the Lord is leading us to a tent ministry, who am I to say no?”

“Bless God. I hoped that would be your answer.”

It took a direct order to get his little man off the horse, then another to get him down for his nap. Nathaniel promised him to be right there when he woke up, and all he had to do was rest for one hour.

Of course, the boy lasted only a few minutes before he slept like only a worn out four-year-old could.

Naps! God’s gift to mothers and homebound fathers.

Nathaniel retreated to the parlor.

His wife pounding the typewriter keys distracted him too much. As much as he’d enjoyed those battle scenes, he wanted to find out what happened with Jules, Pretty and Pearl before Evelyn let something slip.



Pearl scraped the contents of the cutting board into the boiling water. “Did you tell him he’s wasting his time?”

Miss Ruth grinned. “It’s your position that a lovely evening playing Whisk is a waste of the man’s time?”

“What happened to Miss Grayson? I thought Mister Oren was sweet on her. She’s a good player, isn’t she? He could bring her over.”

“He’s still seeing her, but Brother wants you to meet his friend.”

“There’s no need to meet anyone, ma’am. This old war . . . it’ll be over soon, and my Jules will come find me. Or . . .” Tears filled her eyes then overflowed. “I’ll go and find him.”

The old dear wrapped her in a big hug. “Sweetheart, it’s been four years. It’s time you forget about him and make a life for yourself.”

“I don’t want a new life.”



"I'm no spring chicken. You need someone to protect you and care for you. Don't want to end up alone like me. It's no kind of living without love."

"But Jules is my one true love He is my life. Him and you." Pearl kissed her benefactor's cheek. "One more reason I couldn't even consider some other man."

"Brother was right. You'd make a great lawyer, countering every one of my arguments with that logic of yours."

Wiping her cheeks, she turned back to the stove. "I best get to cooking. You know how Mister Oren likes to eat the minute he gets here."

The old lady giggled. "You're right about that. Yes, ma'am, you sure are." She smiled. "But please, sugar, do think about it. Rupert is a strong name, and he's a freedman. You might ought to give him a chance."

"I'll wait for my Jules until he comes or I die."

"Don't you hanker for babies? Most young women your age already have their families started. You don't want to end up an old maid."

Truth be known, everything in her longed for a baby, but she'd never let on. She shook her head. Didn't want just any man to father her children and spend her life with, she wanted her love.

Wanted him to come riding in on a black charger, swoop her up, and lead a battalion of armed men to Live Oaks to take back what was his.

"Rupert, huh? Sounds weak and feeble-minded to me. Like a name you'd give a mule." She held her hands up and wiggled long mule ears.

Miss Ruth snickered first then broke into a full-blown belly laugh. "Oh, dearest, you do have a way of making me jolly."

Sure enough, the old gal had been doing a lot of laughing.

Stew, mixed greens, and sweet cornbread filled the bellies of those at the table. After the dishes were cleared, a nice evening of playing cards—and winning with her new partner, the man had some smarts to be certain—led to coffee and peach cobbler in the parlor.

The freedman was nice enough and plenty polite, but . . . Well, he spent too much time staring. Made her want to run.

Then as though it'd been settled Pearl wanted to be courted, Miss Ruth invited him back the next week for another game. But just because she didn't put her foot down right then and there, did not mean she'd entertain a proposal.

His company was pleasant, and she'd enjoyed the evening alright, but she had no desire for any offer of marriage. At least not from Rupert . . . or anyone else who wasn't named Julius Caesar Harris.

What had happened to him? Where could he be?  
Would he have joined the war?  
Could he be . . .? No. She refused even the thought.



# Chapter Thirteen

Jules reined the mules to a stop in front of the house. The door flung open, and his cousin filled the doorway. "What are you doing here? You best get before I load my gun."

His uncle pushed past his youngest son. "Jules. Good to see you, son."

The boy faced his father. "Pa! He's a turncoat! Fought for the Yankees. We seen him at the Second Battle of Bull Run, plain as day."

"You're right, Riggs. I was there, and if you need . . ." Jules stood and spread his arms. "Here I am. Get your gun."

"Both of you, hush. War's over. There'll be no more bloodshed. We've lost enough. We've all lost enough." Uncle shook his fist at the air. "I'll not have Harris killing Harris."

Riggs spit then shook his head. "Jules ain't none of my kin." The man limped toward the porch's end, grabbed the brace pole, and eased himself down. Without a look back, he stalked toward the barn.

"Is Pretty here?"

His uncle nodded. "She's—"

A squeal silenced the man. A running blur exploded out of the corn. His former slave ran toward him. "Master Jules! Is that really you?"

He climbed down and waited for the young lady. She slowed, stopped right in front of him. Hugging herself, she took to crying like a baby.

"Oh, Mister Jules! Cain't believe you're here. Standing there in the flesh, you is. I was so scared you wouldn't come back. That war were so terrible. Rebs and Yankees crawling all over the whole countryside."

"Where's my Auntie Sweetie Pie?"

Pretty's face went blank for a few heartbeats. "Oh, Poppy! Didn't 'member that's what you called her. Now I do." She turned around.

A rather tall man strode toward him with a baby girl on both hips, one about half the size of the other.

"Your beautiful red flower, yes. Who's this?"

"Tobias, sir. We married right after Mister Lincoln freed me."

The man strode toward him like he'd never felt the master's whip or known a day of slavery. Jules locked eyes with the interloper. No, sir. Never a slave, not that one. He dared to look a white man right in the eye.

"That my Auntie he's holding?"

"Yes, sir. Ain't she pretty?"

The baby girl obviously didn't even know him. A familiar pang stabbed his heart. What if Pearl . . . but like always, he refused to think on it. Whatever had happened, he would rectify once he found her.

When Tobias joined his wife, Jules extended his hand. "Julius Caesar Harris. Good to meet you, sir."

The darkie gave him a slight nod—only courteous, in no way submissive—then grabbed his hand and shook. "Tobias Jenkins. Pleased to meet you. Pretty said you're Poppy's nephew."

"That's right."

The man flashed a mouth full of teeth, then regained some composure. "Didn't mean no disrespect, sir. It only struck me funny. I am glad you're here."

"None taken." Seemed like a good man. Pretty did herself proudly.

That night after supper, while everyone but Riggs sat outside and sipped a little corn squeezing, Pretty took to weeping.

At first, Jules figured it to be on account of him, being back and all. But she wouldn't be consoled by Tobias or him.

Uncle Peter walked over to the ex-slave. He grabbed her shoulder and shook. "That's enough girl, now stop your caterwauling long enough to tell us what's wrong."

She looked right at Jules then whimpered. Bless her heart, she looked so pitiful.

What could it be that spoiled her earlier joy?

The girl wrung her hands. "Masser, ohh I is so sorry what I done. I wronged you bad, and now . . . She broke into sobs, doubling over. "I can't . . . hardly live with it."

"Pretty, what? What in the world are you talking about?"

She sucked in her bottom lip. Her bloodshot eyes pierced his heart. "Forgive me, Mister Jules. Please forgive me. Don't whup me, sir."

Scooting closer on the step, Tobias wrapped his arm around her. "No one's laying a hand on you, my Pretty lady. Now tell this man whatever it is been troubling you so."

Gasping for air, she stopped her crying. "That day . . . when you sold them horses. 'Member? I's freshening up . . ." She sniffed then shook her head.

She had to be talking about Austin, but how could that upset her so? "What about it, girl?"

"That darkie watering them mules—the one you thought might been bothering me."

"So he was after all? What he'd do? You can tell me, Pretty."

"Not what he do." She ducked her head and spoke in a whisper. "It be what he say. What he went and told me, sir."

"What then?"

"Pearl. He seen her when she got sold."

"Sold?" His greatest fear had come upon him. "Where? When?" He had a thousand questions and they all centered around his Pearl. How could Pretty have . . . "Who bought her? Did he know?"

Wouldn't look him in the eye, but she nodded. "A pig farmer wanted her real bad, but that mule skinner say was an old widow woman outbid him every turn. The man telling me and his master got a good laugh over it, is what he say."

A lady bought her? That could be good.

"How'd he know it was Pearl?"

"Oh, he didn't, not at all, but he described her to me, and I knew."

"You knew."

"Yes, sir."

"Did the man know the widow lady? Where she lived?"

"I think he least knew of her, say that she lived in the city. Weren't it Austin we was in?"

"Yes, that's right. Did he tell you his name or his master's? Did he know exactly where the old woman lived?"

She shook her head. "Didn't say."

Everything inside him shook. He bent forward at the waist and blew all of the stale air out.

He couldn't believe it.

She'd known where Pearl was all the time.

And he'd been right there, so close!

She'd let him leave for Galveston. Then Virginia.

His gut wrenched; he couldn't understand.

"Why, Pretty? Why didn't you tell me?"

Her head tilted, and that shoulder came up like trying to shield herself from a blow. "I were feared you'd sell me so you could buy her back."

Would he have done that? Probably so. At best, he'd have talked the widow into trading Pretty for Pearl plus whatever else it took. Poor girl. In a way, he could understand her angst.

Turning, he faced his Uncle. "I apologize, sir. I told you I planned on staying longer, but as you see now, I cannot. Knowing this, I've got to go. Have you thought about my offer?"

"Up to them, and they don't owe me a cent. Even the little one tries to help. They've more than paid their way."

He faced Pretty and her husband. "I'd like for you two to come with me. I'll make it worth it to you."

"Come back to Texas? You don't hate me?"

"No, Pretty. If you'd told me about Pearl, I don't know what I would have done. It's as it is, and here we are. I'm in a much better

position to give Carter Hightower his comeuppance now than I was back then.”

“Why you wantin’ us to come with you?”

“My plan is to get my grandfather hung, and I need your testimony.”

“But sir, exactly what ya offerin’ when ya say to make it worth our time?”

“Once I get control of the land, I’ll deed you a hundred acres and help you two build a house.”

“Oh, Masser . . .”

Jules looked from her husband to Pretty. “None of that.”

“Yes, sir, Mister Jules, sir. You suppose Mammy can live with us, too?”

“If she wants. She can live anywhere her heart desires.”

“Oh, sweet Lord, have mercy! We’re going to Texas.” She faced her husband. “Right, T.J.? You do want to go, don’t you?”



What could he say? Tobias shook his head. He’d heard tell about Texas, but would that man really give him a hundred acres of land?

Never in all his life had he ever known any black man who owned that big of a place and built himself a house on it.

Facing Jules, he rolled the straw from one side of his mouth to another. “What if you can’t get control? What then? How am I going to feed my family?”

“What are you making now?”

“Been working on shares. Did right nice until the war ended, but . . . of late . . .” He shrugged. “Hoping to have enough extra corn to finish off some hogs, no hard money since Appomattox.”

The man nodded, then looked off like he was plotting against him. He smiled. “How’s this sound? Found plus two dollars a month—each—until we part ways, or I deed you and Pretty your land.”

Didn’t seem to be a liar; Tobias studied on the man. Wife held him in great esteem, maybe too much. Still had trouble believing him and her shared a bed for all those months with a pillow between them.

Him owning her and all.

And the way the man acted over her baby, Poppy could be his and not his grandpap’s like she swore. Favored him a lot.

“Bible says count the cost afore you building a house. You got the coin to see this thing through, Mister Jules?”

“Have you looked inside my wagon?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing but a bunch of wooden boxes, what’s in them?”

Pretty pressed her leg into his. Must be thinking he was getting uppity, but if he was going to throw in with Mister Jules Harris, he wanted to know exactly what he was getting himself into.

“Clocks and watches, all kinds of them. Some broke, most working. Been buying and selling them for years now.”

His wife patted his knee. “Mister Jules is a tinkerer. Can fix about anything what moves. Plus, wait ’til you hear him play the fiddle! Sets your feet to dancing.”

Didn’t like her going on and on over the man, and hated the tone in her voice, like she practically worshiped him. Hated her bragging on him so much.

But then . . . he hadn’t given her a second glance. Always making over Poppy, too busy trying to make friends with her.

“Also got two small steam engines. Figure they’ll be worth more than all the time pieces put together. I’m thinking about keeping them though. All kinds of uses for them.”

“You can fix a clock?”

The man nodded. “If I can get the parts. They all work on the same principle.”

A right nice trade, tinkering. Sounded better than sharecropping for a fact. “If we go, will you teach me how to tinker with a clock?”

“Sure, happy to. So it’s settled then?”

Tobias stuck out his hand. “Yes, sir. We’ll be ready first light.”

“Good. Now that it’s firm . . .” Mister Pete reached under his chair and pulled out his fiddle. “I’d like to hear you play again. Who knows if you’ll ever get back to Virginia?”

Exactly like his wife touted, the man could strike a lively tune. Poppy went to dancing with her little sister, and Tobias twirled his Pretty around the yard just outside the circle of friends.

Keep us, Lord, along the way. Bring me and mine to the promised land.



The manuscript pages flew out of Nathaniel’s hand. His eyes followed the blur of white. His wife grinned at him exactly that way the first night he arrived home. She extended her hand. “Can’t you hear the music? Let’s dance!”

To his feet in a jiffy with her help, he wrapped her in his arms and twirled her around the room. She snuggled against his chest. “I love



you, Husband.”

“I love you, too, sweetness. Who’s strumming the fiddle we’re dancing to?”

“Hey! Me, too! Let me in!” Buddy ran and wrapped himself around Nathaniel’s leg. “I can dance gooder.”

Hefting the boy into the embrace, he whirled them both in an exaggerated waltz. Around and around the room he went, kept at it past his ready wind, too, but didn’t quit. She was so happy about something.

Finally, he maneuvered to his chair and pulled them both onto his lap.

How much longer would he be able to hold his family so close? He sated his lungs with several big breaths then returned the giant smile still plastered on his wife’s gorgeous face. “Who’s song has been playing, again?”

She retrieved what looked to be a folded check. “Right here in my hand, my darling, is the biggest advance we’ve ever gotten.” She gave it to him. “All I have to do is sign the contract, and . . . But there is one little tiny fly in the ointment.”

Ten thousand dollars. He blinked, but the numbers didn’t change. “Praise the Lord! We can buy a tent and truck and have more than enough to live off for months—if not years! Bless the Lord, Evelyn! What a wonderful blessing.”

“Amen! Praise Him!”

He leaned back, staring at her as his heart somersaulted. “What’s that one tiny little bug?”

“They want a two-book deal.”

“Have you got another one ready?”

She shook her head, kissed him and Buddy, then stood. “I’ll be right back.”

“Are we rich now, old man?”

“Oh, we’ve always been rich, Son. We have your mother for our own.”

In a flash, she returned with what looked to be one chapter. “I wrote this a while back. I’m calling it *Free! Free Indeed.*” She handed him the pages then picked up her baby boy. “Your son and I will be cooking dinner.”

“Good, I’m hungry.”

She gave him a rather forlorn look then danced Buddy out of the room.



# Chapter Fourteen

Her father's words couldn't be true. Evelyn tugged on Nathaniel's hand. "Please! One hour is all that I'm asking. You can give me that, can't you?"

Her husband kept his seat but held onto her hand. "Sweetheart, Ma dragged me to all sorts of church services—regular Sunday mornings and evenings, revivals, and everything in between."

"I know, I know. But—"

"Plenty of different denominations, too; every single one was a waste of my time. Go if you want to go. I'll not stop you, but why insist I have to?"

"Please."

"And contrary to what you think, I don't hate God. It's just . . ." He shrugged. "I don't care to be counted with the hypocrites. For me, it's hot or cold, but not lukewarm. It's black and white, no shades of gray. The pure and simple fact is I can't be hot, so . . ." He hiked one shoulder.

How she hated him using scripture against her. Tears formed. No matter how many times they had the conversation, nothing ever changed.

"Please, Nathaniel. Don't you want babies? What if . . ." Her eyes overflowed, but she didn't care. She'd cry an ocean of tears if that's what it took to keep him out of hell.

"Awww, sweetheart." He held his hand up. "Please don't cry. You know I hate it when you carry on like this."

"Then go with us! What if this is the day the Lord opens my womb and heals your mother, and . . .?" She wiped racing tears from her cheeks. "Don't you want to be there? See it all first hand. And . . ." A sob escaped.

"Fine. I'll go. If it will stop the waterworks, I'll go. Alright?"

"Oh yes, sir!" She pulled him to his feet. "Praise the Lord! Thank you." She wiped her cheeks and kissed him. He hugged her, but obviously not his best effort. "You'll love the music! It's the best I've ever heard in or out of church."



Nathaniel wasn't so sure. Some of the folks back home could get

rather rambunctious, singing hymns and such. If only they lived what they sang about, he might be more receptive . . . his parents played the chief offenders.

Different at home than they were at church; he didn't want any part of it.

The carriage ride up Main Street from the St. Charles Hotel to Third Street only took a few minutes, but at Third, the traffic clogged up and moved like a slug toward Bonnie Brae where it stopped altogether.

The driver got down and opened the carriage door. "You folks might as well walk from here. What I hear, we couldn't get much closer anyways."

Nathaniel disembarked first, shaking his head. "Thanks. Sure wasn't my idea to come, but I love my wife, so here I am."

"Them Pentecostal nuts been carrying on for days now. Ol' Bob says more gawkers than anything. Quite a show, I suspect; hadn't gone myself. Best take care though."

Nathaniel paid the agreed fare—not the man's fault the way overflowed with buggies and wagons—then held his hand out to Evelyn. "You sure about this?"

"For sure and for certain! Your parents left two hours ago."

Likeed her step for step, not wanting to take another one forward that meant anything to him. He fell in beside her and match.

What he wanted to do was turn and run the opposite direction. But, he'd given her his word. His heart beat faster and his mouth went dry. Everything in him screamed to escape and drag her with him.

A strange tingling suddenly silenced all thoughts of leaving. Gooseflesh crawled down his arms and legs. He quickened his pace. She matched him.

Along Bonnie Brae Street, the folks milled about, most gawking, but some on their knees. Praying. Right there on the street!

A few others' hands lifted into the air with their faces skyward. And they were crying. Men and women. What in the world?

Slipping between groups of folks, he held onto Evelyn's hand and plowed through the crowd. She grabbed his belt at his waistband and fell in behind him.

Half a block from what appeared to be the center of the throng, a sweet melody rode above the porch bursting with more people. How many were there?

White, black, yellow, and brown faces mixed in all together like there'd never been a war or any Jim Crow laws. In them, he spotted his father, tears streaming, standing to the right of the porch.

Nathaniel pushed his way closer, but no one objected or said a word to him.

A chill washed over him.

It all came back in an instant. It was his dream! That was the house he'd been seeing and all the people. But how could it be? He'd always considered it a nightmare.

Still, his heart told him it was no bad vision. It propelled him forward. He had to get inside.

"Jesus, if you're real, I want you. If you're not, please leave me alone."

A warmth spread from his heart and engulfed his whole being, head to toe, inside and out. Clean. He was clean for the first time in his life—as pure as the new driven snow. He sank to his knees and worshiped his Savior.

Tears of sheer joy ran down his face, and he didn't care who saw them.

He'd been saved, born again like he had a whole new heart.

It all made sense.

All those sermons; all the songs.

Jesus was real.

The Messiah! Ready and able to save.

And that day, right there in front of the house he'd seen in his dreams for so many years . . . the Lord reached down with His everlasting, never-ending love and saved Nathaniel's soul from hell.

What amazing grace . . .

An arm draped over his shoulder. Evelyn pressed her mouth next to his ear. Her words obviously spoken with great effort, she beckoned him. "Come. See. What the Lord. Has done."

When had she knelt beside him? He stood then pulled her to her feet. The crowd parted, and there she was. His mother. Dancing and twirling. His father held her crutches. He was crying like a baby.

But how?

A hush fell.

Piano keys, being struck ever so slightly, sounded clear and pure. Then a woman sang in a strange language. Her song rode the breeze straight to him and into his heart. Though Nathaniel had never heard it before, he understood every word.

But how?

An old man to his left whispered, "It's Hebrew. The lady is singing of the Lord's mercy and grace in the Hebrew language. But she isn't a Jew."

A stirring rose from his belly, and Nathaniel opened his mouth and joined her in a baritone that surprised him. Others joined in. Soon the song echoed from the other houses in the neighborhood.



Tears blinded Nathaniel. He set the pages down then rose to find his wife and son. He had a need to hold them. In the kitchen, she chopped carrots. Buddy sampled her efforts.

“Oh, Evelyn. What a day that was. You think they’ll publish it?”

She grinned. “The offer came from Harcourt, Brace & Howe. Baker and Taylor wanted rewrites before they committed to anything.”

“How much of our lives are you planning on telling?”

She scrunched her shoulders and gave him her little girl look. “As much as you’ll let me.”

He chuckled. His dearest had always been an open book, ready to tell anyone anything—just one of the reasons he fell in love with her when she was only six years old, though at the time, he never thought of it as such.

A warmth spread over him, a powerful witness indeed.

“No telling how many folks we can lead to the Lord with the money.”

“So . . . you’re saying to sign?” She looked at the empty chair then at all the vegetables from the ladies’ garden. “Want to help? Quicker I get it on and boiling, the faster it’ll be soup.”

“I could . . . but if memory serves, Jules and Pretty were on their way back to Texas, and . . . you understand.”

“Want me to tell you what happened? Save you some reading time.”

He backed away a step. “Don’t you dare. Call me when it’s ready.”

Buddy held out a half-eaten carrot slice. “Want a bite?”

“Thank you.” He took a nibble and handed it back.



While the men went about offloading the wagon, Pretty sat under a big old oak tree with the girls on an old blanket. Her little ones didn’t need much of her attention. She kept stealing glances at Mister Jules.

Could hardly stand it, being so close to him, but not getting to sit next to him or worse, sleep in the same bed. In her dreams, she still always hoped the pillow would vanish, and she’d wake in his arms.

Tobias Jenkins was a good man, but . . . she told herself to think better thoughts. Hard as she tried though, she couldn't shake the longings from her heart. What if Pearl were married with a wagon load of youngsters of her own?

Would . . . No. She couldn't, wouldn't think about leaving T.J. It'd surely break his heart.

And he loved her Poppy much as her baby girl loved him, even though she weren't his. Showed no difference between her and his own baby girl. He didn't deserve to be treated like that.

The last box got set onto the depot's freight dock. She hated Mister Jules selling his wagon and mules; never seen one so stout before. At least he kept the harness. Riding the train, she'd be home quicker.

Also meant she'd be in the same state as the monster again. Would he still think he owned her?

A big part of her wanted to forget it all. Stay put right there with Uncle Pete and Riggs, but if she could help Mister Jules get the ranch that was rightfully his and get his grandfather put into jail, then everything would be worth it.

Not to mention the hundred acres and a house of her own to raise her girls in. Might even give Tobias a son.

"We'll be right back." She looked up. T.J. waved.

She returned the gesture then leaned back against the tree's trunk. She wondered where they were going, but not enough to ask. Soon, she daydreamed again.

"Mama?" Poppy stood right beside her, holding the baby. "Dilly's stinky."

"Oh, she is? Well, you just give that smelly sister to me, Sweetie Pie. And gets my bags, please, ma'am."

"Want me to fetch water, too? Right yonder's a trough."

"No, I gots some wet rags wrapped up in the oil cloth."

Her firstborn sat down beside her, careful to keep her dress over her lap, exactly like Pretty had taught her. "Mama?"

"What, baby?"

"Is Mister Jules my real daddy?"

"No, baby. His grandfather is."

She shook her head. "No, I think it's Mister Jules 'cause he loves me so much."

Pretty wrapped the dirty diaper and put it away. "He tell you that?"

"No, but . . ." She grinned. "He slips me hard candy and licorice. I give Dilly some even if she ain't his for sure."

"Hard candy? Tell me you have not been giving your baby sister hard candy!"

“No, ma’am. It’s too good to be giving away. I let her suck on a licorice stick a little. That’s all. Since she’s only got two teethies.”

Pretty finished pinning the diaper then picked up her sweet Daffodil. “Good. She could choke on that hard candy.”

“How come? All you do is suck on it, she don’t have to chew or nothing.”

“Well, she don’t know that, and she’s liable to swallow it right down whole. It’d get stuck in her throat then she couldn’t breathe and she’d turn blue and die and go to Heaven then we would never see her again ’til we died, too. You know how we have to mash everything up before we give it to her.”

“Mama?”

“Yes, Poppy.”

“Would Dilly be dead in Heaven?”

“No, baby, she’d be alive there and waiting on us.”

“So she wouldn’t really die?”

The child asked more questions than acorns on an oak. “Well, it would be her spirit that keeps on living after her little body died on account of she couldn’t get no breath. But the Good Lord would give her a new body.”

“How would we know her then?”

“Baby, don’t you be worrying so about such things. She ain’t going to die because you ain’t going to give her any hard candy. Right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Will we be in Texas today?”

“No. We’ll be on the train for two days then have to take a steamboat across the Mississippi River. Mister Jules says he’s going to buy another wagon and mules there to take us on into Austin. We might be on the road for two weeks.”

“Is that a long time?”

“Yes, it is. Especially riding with a little girl who asks too many questions.” There they were, coming toward her. “They’re back. Come on, help me gather up everything.”

“Can I just call Mister Jules daddy?”

“No, baby girl, that wouldn’t be right. He’s not your father.”

“Neither is Tobias, and you told me I could call him daddy.”

“That’s different. Now hush up for a while, child.”

Her daughter did as she was told and took to gathering the blanket, but the grim expression on her sweet, pretty face told her heart.





Nathaniel set the manuscript in his lap and chuckled. Buddy wasn't quite there with Poppy yet, but almost. When his boy got wound up, he could hit a body with some rapid fire questions to be certain. He looked skyward.

"I love your sense of humor, Lord." Slipping onto his knees, he thanked his Maker for the provisions he'd supplied. "Bless Evelyn, Father. Thank you for the talents you've given her and for the doors You've opened at our new publishing company. Thank You for whoever decided to send us that check."

A warmth filled his heart then metamorphosed to a powerful witness that he was on the right path. Before, Nathaniel couldn't have said he was certain the idea of a tent to take on the road as an evangelist came from God.

Might have only been his flesh, but praise Him, the Lord confirmed it all with the money—more than enough.

He slipped back into his chair. Should be out making a deal on the best truck, trailer, and tent he could find, but he'd told his wife he'd read her novel.

Besides, he didn't figure he could stand not knowing how it all turned out for Jules, Pretty, and Pearl. He loved it all the more after meeting the dear lady who shared her life with his wife.



# Chapter Fifteen

The intrigue tickled Pearl some. It also piqued her curiosity. If she didn't know better, she'd think Miss Ruth and her brother plotted against her.

Seeing how the old dears had a private conflagration in the parlor for the first time since she'd been there—and with the pocket doors pulled tight.

Heard tell once that a body could hear through the wood, putting a crystal goblet's drinking edge on the door and an ear on the base.

But, as much as she wanted to know what they discussed inside, she wouldn't stoop to eavesdropping, especially not on the dear lady who'd saved her from a horrible fate and a noose.

After better than a good quarter hour, the little metal rollers squealed, followed by a double plop. Mister Oren, with his sister hot on his heels, stepped into the kitchen. Pearl jumped to her feet. "The tea's ready, and the cookies are about done."

Oren took the seat at the head of the table, his usual spot. "Sit, sweetheart. We need to talk."

She eased back down. "Yes, sir." What could it be? His tone hinted at something big afoot, but his face didn't betray his topic.

Miss Ruth sat to her brother's right. Pearl questioned with her eyes, but the grand lady only offered a weak smile.

"Pearl, how are things between you and Rupert?"

The freedman . . . so that was it . . . but what about him? "Fine, sir. I guess. Has he done something? Or said something?"

"No. Uh . . . well, it's obvious, the man's in love with you."

Miss Ruth patted her brother's hand then held Pearl's gaze. "Dear, won't you share your heart with us? We'd both love to see you and Rupert settled."

Her heart?

From its depths, it screamed no, but she held her peace. What in the world brought this on?

"Settled?" She shook her head. "But I don't love him. Not at all. He's a nice enough man, but . . ." Matter of fact, the only mark against him was that he wasn't Jules. She could never . . . "What do you know? Have you heard something?"

"Why no, dear. What would we hear?"

"That my Jules died. Is he gone?" The thumping in her chest quickened. "Was his name on a new list of the war dead?"

"No, no. That isn't it at all." Miss Ruth reached both hands across the table, and Pearl took them. The dear lady squeezed reassuringly.

Mister Oren covered his mouth with his hand and sighed. "You see, a young man came to my office this morning, asking about you and Ruth."

She jumped to her feet. "Jules! Was it my Jules?"

Oren nodded. "Well, said he was, but I wanted to make sure. He's got a negro couple with him—and two children. The older child is real light skinned, and . . ."

Jules! He'd come for her! She knew he would. Almost knocking her chair over, she searched his face. "Where? Where is he, Mister Oren?"

"Camped out. Not far from here."

Her heart flipped, climbed into her throat. Tears blurred her vision. He was there. He'd come! She looked around.

Her feet wanted to run, but where? Which direction?

Breath came hard.

"Please! Tell me! Where is he? Which way is my Jules?"

"Come on, sweetie." Miss Ruth stood. "We'll take you to him."

Mister Oren kept his horse at an easy trot. She didn't cotton with mistreating a beast of burden but sure seemed that the situation warranted much more urgency. Why her heart practically beat right out of her chest.

"Please, can't we go any faster?"

Snuggling into her shoulder, Miss Ruth patted her hand. "Relax, sweet one. Your Jules isn't going anywhere."

After what seemed to be hours—though probably no more than twenty or thirty minutes—a covered wagon still a ways off came into view. A campfire burned, and four mules grazed off to the side.

"Is that him?"

"Think so. Looks about what he described."

A black man, balancing a little one on his hip, strolled from the back of the wagon. Too tall to be Jules.

Someone smaller rounded the wagon with the little light-skinned girl holding his hand. Pretty? But how . . . then following the woman . . . The way he walked! She'd know that stride anywhere.

She cupped both hands around her mouth, suddenly aware of nothing or no one but her beloved.

"Jules! Jules!"

A blur broke from the camp, racing toward the buggy. "Pearl? Is that you?"

"Let me down! Let me out! Now!"

Mister Oren stopped the rig, and she catapulted over Miss Ruth on the way to terra firma. She ran to him. He stopped and opened his arms. She threw herself into his embrace and sobbed.

"Jules, my Jules."

“Oh, Pearl. I thought I might never see you again. Pearl! It is you!” He twirled her then wrapped her tight, as though he’d never let her go again. She loved him, and he’d come for her. Nothing else mattered. Nothing.

Leaning back, he stared into her eyes. “I love you, Pearl. Will you marry me? Today? Now.”

Joyful tears overflowed. “Oh, you know I love you, too, Julius Caesar Harris! Yes, I’ll marry you! Of course, I’ll marry you!”

For the first time ever, he pressed his lips to hers. She kissed him back.

Something tugged her dress. She looked down. A beautiful little girl, maybe five or six, grinned up at her. “You Miss Pearl?”

The child proved to be in the image of her beloved. She glanced at the woman who’d followed her Jules from the camp. “Pretty?”

How could her friend have betrayed her so? Or maybe . . . she hated what Pretty had done, but it couldn’t be changed, so what did it matter? Nothing mattered right that moment because he’d found her!

Everything would be right. She would be married to the lover of her soul, the man her heart beat for.

Oh Lord, thank You for bringing my Jules back to me.

If only he had waited, it would be perfect, but how could she hate Pretty—or him—for making a baby? Children were truly a blessing from the Lord. Rupert had been using that argument of late.

Kneeling, she took the child’s hands and nodded. “Yes, precious, I’m Pearl.”

Beaming, Jules knelt, too, and grinned. “This is Poppy, but I call her Auntie Sweetie Pie.”

“Why would you call her that?”

“Because she’s my aunt.”

Pearl looked from the child to Jules then back. “So . . . she isn’t yours . . . and Pretty’s baby?”

The beautiful little lady wrapped an arm over Jules’ shoulders. “No, ma’am. He isn’t my daddy. His grandpa is.” Poppy turned and pointed. “And she’s my mama!”

Pearl looked to her childhood playmate, who hung just out of reach and nodded. “She’s right. Masser Carter is her pappy.”

Relief filled Pearl’s heart. She stood and held her arm out toward her friend. The girl rushed into her embrace, and she and Pretty wept on each other’s shoulders.



Oren closed his office door. Once the newlyweds were in and seated, he took his chair behind his desk. He'd never seen Pearl so happy. "I was going to ask you how married life was treating you, girl, but it's written all over your face."

Scooting forward in her chair, she sat prim and proper like, exactly as his sister had taught her. "Yes, sir." She ogled over at her husband. "My dreams have come true."

"Well now." Oren looked at young Mister Harris. "I've finished researching your claim, and..." He loved this part, giving a client good news. "Though it will be a rather tough row to hoe in court—Carter Hightower has a lot of friends here in Austin—but we have a winnable case. You are clearly the rightful heir to three-quarters of Live Oaks, and have a legal lien on the fourth."

"What about him murdering my father?"

"Hard to prove, but we'll address that when the time is right. Did you place the advertisements as I instructed?"

"Yes, sir." The boy named all the major papers in Texas and Louisiana that he had sent his notice of help to. "If we can locate Big Jim and get him back here to testify, what are my chances?"

He shook his head. "Not good. An ex-slave's word doesn't carry the weight of a white man's, but at least he can take the stand. Before the war, he wouldn't have been allowed to do even that."

The boy opened his mouth, but Oren silenced him with a wave.

"If we're successful of relieving your grandfather of his ready cash and evict him from the estate, then get him in criminal court, we'll have a better chance of seeing him answer for his crimes."

"What about him beating Pretty?"

Oren hiked his off shoulder. "No law against that back then, whipping that girl was deemed no different than him taking a strap to a balky mule. Could have killed her—or any of your slaves—and no one could or would have said a word."

"Once we establish that all the darkies on Live Oak were mine, could I sue him for damaging my property?"

"I like the way you think, son. And the answer is yes. Her value would have definitely been diminished." A shiver raced across his innards. He'd never seen a gal's back scarred so badly before.

Not that he observed that many, but still . . . In a just world, Carter Hightower needed to answer for his deeds. In this world and the next.



Boom!

Nathaniel's bedroom door flew open, and his little man raced inside, launching himself into his lap, singing in his high tenor.

"It's soup! And mama says for us to come to the tablllle. Time to eeeeeat." His voice warbled with a purity that belied his age. He threw his arms out and grinned. "Like my song?"

"Yes, sir. I love the way you sing."

He gathered the manuscript pages Buddy had knocked to the floor, set them on the side table, then carried his little man downstairs.

Three steaming bowls sat beside milk-filled glasses, and a bowl covered by a dish towel sat in the middle—Nathaniel hoped she'd filled it with her sweet cornbread.

Buddy wiggled free then raced to his place.

Halfway through his dinner, Nathaniel set his spoon on the little plate, next to his second piece of cornbread. "How much longer do you want to stay here?"

"In Austin?" She gave him a little head toss. "We're paid up until the end of the month. Helen and Robert are leaving for Hico next week. He answered their call to pastor the Holiness Church there. The rest of the folks who haven't left, plan on being out by the last weekend."

"I was thinking we need to go travel trailer shopping. Have any good ideas where to start?"

"Not really, but Miss Pearl might. She's lived here for years now."

He could hardly stand asking, but he really didn't have the time to read more, not yet. "Tell me . . ." He closed his eyes and twisted his mouth.

Maybe she'd take pity on him and not answer his question. "Did Hightower stand trial?"

She laughed. "Oh, yes! He most certainly did. Want to hear all about it?"

"Yes and no." He grinned. "*Pearl of Great Price* is truly an awesome story, honey. Let's finish our soup then go see if we can find our new home. You can tell me more of the story while we look."



Evelyn loved the effect her newest novel had on him. Hopefully, the reading public would be of like mind, never having to pass the collection plate at any of her beloved's services would be awesome.

Be exactly like it had been at Azusa Street.

They could have an offering box stuck off somewhere with a sign. She hated pastors to fleece their sheep.

“Want to wash or dry?” She grinned.

Standing on his chair, Buddy stuck his thumbs into his chest. “Me and my old man dry.” He looked to his father. “Right?”

“Can I finish my soup first?”

So what if it took her way longer than both her men wanted it to take getting gone? They should know she wasn’t about to go out in public in a house dress with no hat.

Her mother had taught her better than that.

She smiled at the thought of her dearly departed mother. At least her parents got to go together in the earthquake.

The most horrible thing she could ever think of would be Nathaniel getting promoted to Heaven and leaving her behind. She absolutely could not bear the thought of it, and couldn’t think on it for another minute!

God knew her heart, and He would never do such a thing to her. He just couldn’t.

After only two blocks of walking, Nathaniel flagged a carriage, then to her surprise, told the man to go downtown. She didn’t know Austin all that well, but she did know for a fact there were no Tin Cans for sale in the heart of the Texas Capital.

“I thought we were caravan shopping?”

He grinned. “According to Solomon, there is a time for all things. Want to hear the exact scripture?”

“I know the Bible, too. But still, specifically, what are you talking about?”

“Mister Ford has a real nice automobile for sale, thought we might buy us one.”

“Can a Model T pull a trailer?”

“Wouldn’t ask it to. We’ll need a truck as well. I’ve been thinking on it.”

“Care to share? Why do we need two vehicles?”

“Think about it. We get all set up somewhere to preach, and either we stay right there or have to unhook the truck from the trailer. A car gives us freedom to visit hospitals or—”

“Go wherever we want.” Bumping her shoulder into his, she giggled. “But you haven’t thought this all the way through, Husband. You can’t drive a car and a truck at the same time.”

“How about Buddy? Or better . . . you?”

“Oh, no. I couldn’t. You don’t want me behind the wheel of one of those contraptions. Why, I’d kill some poor farmer or . . . No. Sorry, dear, that’s out of the question.”

Her heart almost thumped out of her chest, like it did before she



mounted Twinkle Toes that first time.

Could she really drive an automobile?

“Sweetheart, you learned how to ride a horse when you were six. Remember? I was there. And driving Mister Ford’s contraptions, as you call them, is a skill anyone with your intelligence, beauty, and charm can learn in one afternoon.”

“What about those stupid cranks? I’ve heard of folks breaking their arms trying to start a Ford on a cold morning.”

Beaming as if he’d just led some poor lost soul to the Lord, he looked so sure of her. “Haven’t you heard? Electric starters now—new this year. No more cranking.”

Both of her men teamed up with the salesman against her. Between Nathaniel’s logic, Buddy’s passion and Hank the auto hawker’s smooth words, she only had one argument left. She waved the salesman away.

Her husband wore too smug of an expression for her taste, while her son seemed about ready to burst with pure joy. “Five hundred dollars, dear, that’s a lot of money.”

“Hey! Praise the Lord, sweetie. Isn’t God good providing for us like He does? Why it’s only half our tithe. Think of it as a tool. If we were going to be farming, would you think it excessive to buy a plow or planter? Or a stout wagon to haul the grain in?”

“Of course not, but . . .”

“We’re in the business of winning souls for the Lord. Having a Ford Runabout to run about in so that we don’t have to walk—”

“Or rumble around in a twenty-two truck.” His son parroted what Hank had said earlier but apparently mixed in the small bore rifle.

Her husband looked at the boy and grinned like that silly Cheshire cat.

“Thanks, little man. To spread the Good News, seems to me, buying the Model T is the right thing to do. We can get a used truck to offset the cost. Now, if you feel the need to pray on it . . .”

How she hated his logic sometimes. Of course, he was right, and she hated that as well. Still. She folded her arms over her chest. She did trust him . . . and more importantly, God in him. He was her head . . . like Christ headed His church.

And she had been teaching the younger women about submitting to their husbands—as unto the Lord Himself.

If she didn’t love him so much . . . She stalked out and found a place to pout then gave him her best I’ll-get-you-later smile when he showed around the corner.

“What if I can’t learn to drive? Or—”

“Not a chance. Come on back and take another look.”

Though she tried to glare, his smile and Buddy’s pleading eyes

won the day. "Fine then. Guess we need to make a trip to the bank."

Nathaniel turned. "Hey, Hank, can you drive us to the bank in our new Runabout?"

The salesman beamed. "Yes, sir. Of course, sir. I'll be pleased as punch to give you a lesson on the way."

That night, as if the Lord agreed with her husband, He rewarded her with the most pleasant dream. Next morning, the vision's remembrance brought comfort and confirmation.

So like her precious Heavenly Father to confirm in such a lovely way the path she walked was in His perfect will.

As much as she would love for Him to tell her and Nathaniel in plain spoken words, He still required the just to walk by faith exactly as He had back in the days of the disciples and Abraham with his Sarah.

Through two cups of coffee and most of the *Austin American Statesman* he loved reading of a morning, she kept her peace.

He folded the rag then set it on the table.

"More coffee?"

"Sure. Thank you."

She filled his and her mugs then sat back down. "I had a wonderful dream last night."



# Chapter Sixteen

Nathaniel knew better, but she seemed about to be busting to tell him. What could it hurt? He took a sip. Plus, he saw no way out, so he smiled. "Want to tell me?"

Returning his mirth, she leaned forward. Resting her chin on her hands with such an expression of bliss softened her face way past kissable.

Oh, how in the world had God blessed him so to create this beautiful creature to be his wife? He didn't deserve her in any way, and yet, God . . .

"I saw our sweet Milly May walking along the shore of the Crystal Sea. Sometimes she'd skip, then dance and twirl through the water's edge, having so much fun. Then I was there with her!" Tears filled her eyes. "Oh, Nathaniel, she's so beautiful. Half a head taller than Buddy. She's six now. And then the best part."

"Tell me."

Pursing her lips, she sniffed then grinned so big it about split her face in two.

"We came around a huge big shade tree, and right there on the beach, MayMee sat a quilt with two china cups and a pot of tea! But she wasn't old! She was young! Maybe about the same age when she came west and met PawPaw for the first time.

"Milly hugged and kissed her namesake, then they had the nicest time sipping tea and eating little cakes."

"You didn't get any?"

Shrugging, she blinked several times then wiped her eyes. "It was like I could see them but wasn't there anymore. I kept hoping Mama would join them. Oh my! There's so many of our kin there! I can hardly wait."

"Trust me, you can wait."

"It's going to be so glorious to see them again, to be united for all eternity with the Lord."

He stood and held his arms out, his own tears streaming, too, then. She jumped to her feet and hurried into his embrace. "Bless God, sweetheart. But we can't go just yet. There are too many lost souls we need to be sure gets there, too."

"That's true."

"And I know you want to take them with us as much as I do."

The love in her eyes always overwhelmed him. She laid her head on his chest then nodded. "I don't think we should even think about buying a used truck, sweetheart."

What? Didn't she understand? A truck to pull their new home from town to town and haul the tent around in was a must. "But why? We need one, honey."

"Ford makes a perfectly good one-ton. I heard Hank telling you all about it. Can't we get the chassis for six hundred and what? Another fifty or so to have a box built?"

Ah, he liked where this was going. "Maybe more, but it'd sure be nice. That electric starter is awesome."

"Exactly."

He kissed her then hugged her even tighter. "Want me to get Buddy up?"

"Don't you dare. He's way too grumpy if he doesn't get his sleep."

"Probably right. I don't think Hank comes in this early anyway." He leaned back. "We could go to Ohio and buy one of those heavy duty Garford Trucks. Hear tell they'll haul over three tons without breaking a sweat."

"How much does one cost?"

"Only thirty-nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars." He grinned. "A real bargain."

"Plus you're thinking about buying a circus tent, right? And how about a couple of trained elephants to help raise it up?"

His head bobbed exactly like her son was wont to do when it appeared he'd get his way, too. "It would sure bring in crowds. We could give free rides to all the new converts."

She hugged him real tight then backed away a step. "Let's stick with the Ford. I'd like to have some walking around money after we get all lined out. Plus, we still need to purchase our new home on wheels."

Only took two weeks for his truck to get its box built and installed. She was happy to let him drive her car, chauffeuring her and Buddy all over town in the Runabout, but she loved driving.

And for sure and for certain, the Model T was her baby. She had a belly laugh over him demanding a hat and goggles and wanting to be tipped for being such a good driver.

The next to last night in the Caswell House, Evelyn brought him the completed manuscript. "I know I told the story, but figured you still might like to read the rest for yourself before I send it to my editor."

"Want me to mark it up or not?"

"Sure, I haven't seen the final draft yet. Never can have too many pairs of fresh eyes—oh, and remind me to call New York tomorrow and let them know we're leaving Austin."

"Sure. How you coming on *Free! Free Indeed!* Great title, by the way."

“It’s going well. Would you rather read that? I’ve got two chapters you haven’t seen.”



“No, I want to finish *Pearl* first.”



The familiarity of the ranch didn’t help quell Jule’s nerves, nor the armed men Mister Worthington had hired to come along. He hated it that he wanted to run and hide under a bed somewhere.

He had to face the old man, and worse, his mother. His whole life, she’d been taking Carter Hightower’s side, and he figured that day would be no different.

Of their own, his lips spread. Seeing her expression when he told her about Pearl would be worth the trip. He patted his wife’s knee. “Not much farther now.”

She nodded but remained quiet for a few turns of the wagon’s wheels then suddenly stood. “There!” She pointed. “I can see our room.” She sat back down, slipped her hand into his, and squeezed. “He’s going to be so mad. Let Mister Oren do all the talking.”

Good advice. Would he be able to follow it though?

Hiding behind his lawyer would be akin to crawling under his bed. A part of him wanted to be the one delivering the news, be the kind of man his father used to talk with him about being.

The dogs sounded the alarm. A few darkies appeared, then every one of them ran back inside. How many of the ex-slaves had stayed on? For Pretty’s sake, he hoped Mammy still worked there. Ol’ Harley would be for sure. The man had to be pushing seventy—maybe more.

Shame Big Jim hadn’t been located.

Arresting the old man would be far better than serving him papers.

The lead rider reined his mount to a stop short of the porch, pulled his scatter gun from its sheath, and laid the weapon across the crook of his arm. The other two stopped near him but made no show of force.

According to Oren, both were armed and dangerous.

His mother burst out of the front door first with the old man right on her heels. Both had aged considerably. Him more than her though.

She shaded her eyes. "Jules? Is that you, Son?"

"Yes, Mother. Indeed it is me." His feet wanted to run to her, wrap his arms around her and hold her. She was his mother, and his heart ached for how badly she'd be hurt. He stood and took his wife's hand instead. "And Pearl."

If looks could murder a man, the glare his grandfather leveled on him would put him six feet under. Mother stepped toward him, but the old man grabbed her arm.

"Hold your peace, Judith. Your boy brought hired guns. Can't you see? This does not appear to be a social call."

Worthington climbed down and strolled toward the porch. "Well said, Carter. We've come to serve you with this eviction notice." He extended the folded paper toward the devil. "You have thirty days to leave and be gone, or the sheriff will be notified."

"Gone?" The idea had obviously taken him by surprise. "Gone!" He took to his usual cursing everything in sight, slapped the notice from Oren's hand to the ground, then raised his fist, shaking it at Jules. "This is my land! It's my home! And you have the gall to come here and try to tell me I've got to get off my own place?"

"It isn't yours, Carter. And you know it. I haven't only seen John Harris' will, I've been busy. It's been probated. I also located the lien Mister Harris filed on your headright land. That loan is in default."

Was steam coming off his grandfather's nearly bald head?

The old barrister glanced back at Jules, lips spread into a grin, then turned back. "Consider the thirty days a favor from your grandson. Law allows less."

The old man's cheeks reddened all the way up under the few locks of wispy white hair. His eyes bulged.

"Pack of lies you've bought into, Worthington. When that no good husband to my daughter died, the land and all his possessions went to my daughter. Not that slithering disappointment of a boy." He spat. "Just like his father."

His mother looked past the attorney right at Jules. "Why are you doing this, Son? Here all these years, I've thought you were dead. And now you've come home, and . . . you . . . do this? Are you kicking me off the property, too?"

"You aren't going anywhere, Judith, and neither am I." The hate in the old man's growl contorted his face. Drool escaped the corner of his mouth.

Jules jumped down and joined his lawyer. "Mother, your father there murdered mine—your husband."

"No, Son. Your father had a heart attack."

"Dad did not have any heart condition. Why would you ever believe such a story?" He pointed at the slobbering, ruby-headed man.

“He poisoned him. Murdered my father. He deserves everything I can do to him. And if I have anything to say about it, this will only be the start of it.”

“Oh, Jules! Your grandfather didn’t kill John. Where have you gotten such a notion? His heart . . . it just gave way . . . pure and simple.”

“That’s what he told you. Big Jim saw him though. He put something in Dad’s drink the night he died, then sold Jim off to keep him from telling you.”

“Lies! Nothing but a pack of lies from the pit of hell! I sold Jim because he wouldn’t work! He was the laziest nigger ever. Your daddy knew it, too, but he refused to make him work. Pampered that man worse than a piccaninny.

“Wasn’t about to feed that no good another bite of my food. Should have whipped him dead, but he was worth more alive. Had no choice but to sell him. The sloth set a bad example to all the others.”

A blur rushed out of the door. Mammy hurried down the steps then whirled once she reached Jules.

“That’s a lie! My Jim worked harder than any of them! Ya sold him off on account of what he seen.” She turned toward Jules. “I seen it, too. Masser Carter put rat poison in ya pappy’s drink. Killed him dead.”

“Father! You didn’t!”

“I seen it with my own eyes, Miss Judith. They’d been arguing over money that whole time ya was off seeing to ya mother.”

“Daddy? Is that right?”

Cursing again, he shook his head. “Of course not! John was a weak man and his cursed weak heart quit beating. That’s all.”

“But he wasn’t! And he loved me.”

“Listen, dear. We’d been having words alright, but we got it all worked out. That night, I had this ungrateful liar cook us a big dinner to celebrate coming to like minds. You can’t believe that nigger wench. She’s hated me for selling off that worthless man of hers.”

His mother looked from her father to the cook. “I’ve never known Mammy to shirk or lie or . . .” She looked back. “Jim either. He was a good slave, almost more like a friend to my John.”

One could witness the gears in her mind going round.

“You did kill him, didn’t you? We saved Live Oaks, then you . . . you murdered my husband?” Faster than a snake strike, she slapped his face.

Then even quicker, he drove his fist into hers.

She wilted to the ground in a heap of skirt and petticoats.

Jules raced toward the porch and launched himself at the old man, who toppled. Two, three blows landed square! Someone pulled



him off and to his feet.

His knuckles hurt, and his heart beat like the dickens. He shook his hands and stood taller. He'd bested the beast and had his witness in Mammy to file charges of murder.

Carter Hightower would pay.

His mother wrapped her arms around him. "Oh, Jules. I'm so sorry."

One of the hired guns so happened to be a Texas Ranger, so he arrested him on the spot. Thinking of the murderer as his grandfather sickened Jules. He hated any relation to such an inhumane monster, much less ancestry.

That night, he and his bride slept the bed she had come to so many years before. But that night he didn't place any pillow between him and his queen.



Nathaniel set the manuscript down. Evelyn had told him about the trial and getting Pretty and Tobias' new home built. Tickled him Mammy wanted to stay in her kitchen.

Not that her daughter and grandsugars were that far away, and she wore a steady trail to their new house and back about every day.

Perhaps he'd read the rest once they published it and he could hold a real book. He'd already lollygagged long enough. Needed to get up and get busy, be about the Lord's business.

Leaving the Caswell House tugged more at his wife's and son's hearts than Nathaniel's, but then he hadn't been there as long. Buddy wanted to ride with him, and though she didn't say anything, it sure appeared to irritate the boy's mother.

Leastwise more than it pleased him.

With the bags packed away in the truck, and after she'd made her third did-I-leave-anything search, he sidled up next to her. Buddy busied himself play-driving the new truck. "I let him steer."

"What are you talking about?"

"Buddy." He grinned. "He wants to ride with me because I let him sit my lap and steer. He loves driving."

"Oh, Nathaniel! What are you thinking? That's dangerous."

"No, it isn't. And he's good at it. Keeps the radiator cap dead center on the road, no matter how much dust you raise."

Closing her eyes, she shook her head back and forth ever so slowly. "You spoil him, Husband. He's only four."

He waited until she looked up then cocked an eyebrow. “A long four.”

“Oh you!” She snickered then slipped her hand into his and squeezed. “If he’s so good, how about Buddy drives the Runabout and I sit your lap and steer?”

“Hey, sounds great to me, but . . . Maybe we best give that a few years. You ready then?”

“Yes and no. Maybe. Would you mind making one more sweep just to be for sure and for certain that I haven’t left anything? A fresh pair of eyes is always good, and not only on a manuscript.”

As requested, he did. She hadn’t. Shortly, he and his embarked on what he hoped would be a great harvest for the Lord.

Only took four days to cover the eighty miles from the Capital to the home of the Alamo. Not bad, especially considering two of the layovers resulted in bookings for future revivals in Holiness Churches.

But nothing could have prepared him for San Antonio.



# Chapter Seventeen

Once Nathaniel set the tent—never dreamed that job would be so hard—and got the crates and planks arranged under the canvas, he loaded Buddy and Evelyn in the Runabout and headed out to spread the word amongst the faithful.

The more sedate denominations' clergymen gave him a bit of a cold shoulder, but the Methodist, Baptist, and Nazarene pastors seemed interested enough. None committed to helping, especially once they realized he was full Gospel.

At least they promised to tell their congregants.

His very first tent meeting that evening, no one came. Not one soul. So he preached to his wife and son.

Next morning, neither he nor Evelyn spoke of the night until the third cup of coffee. His wife set her mug down rather hard on the trailer's little table. "We need to find a printer."

"What for?"

"Even better, why don't we buy us a mimeograph?"

"A machine that makes copies?"

"Exactly." She grinned. "We can print up flyers to pass out and post around. Probably ought to think about running an ad in the newspaper."

"What do you think one of those machines cost?"

"I don't have any idea, but in the long run, it'd probably be cheaper than paying a printer to produce them. Sooner or later, it'd surely pay for itself, and . . . we are in this for the long haul . . . are we not?"

"Yes, ma'am. And if our buying a mimeograph is what it takes, then bless God we've still got the coin He provided." He leaned back in his bench and studied her. "Who knew I'd married myself such an intelligent campaigner?"

"Aww."

Coming forward again, he took both her hands. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

"Don't you remember?" She giggled. "When I opened my eyes this fine morning to find you staring at me? Told me there and then. And then again when I poured your first cup of coffee?"

"Well, I could never tell you enough." He kissed her hands.

"I love you, too, my dear." She sipped her sweet brew. "No telling how many folks would have gotten saved last night. That sermon you preached . . . it was definitely anointed. I wanted to get saved all over again."

“Thank you.” He stood. “If memory serves, it’s my turn to cook breakfast.”



It took Evelyn two full days to get everything lined out.

The next morning, her fourth in San Antonio, armed with a right nice stack of freshly mimeographed flyers and escorted by about the cutest helper boy any bill poster ever had, she set out to fill her husband’s revival tent.

After dropping Nathaniel off at the hospital, she and Buddy drove the Runabout downtown. Her little partner held the stack while she pinned or taped notices on every bulletin board, barber shop window, or stray post she could find.

On his own, Buddy took to passing out the flyers to anyone who came within a few feet.

While most paid little attention or showed no interest, some asked questions or directions. She worked her way back to the Ford then to buy herself a copy of the San Antonio Express.

Fanning the pages, she smiled at the quarter-page advertisement. Right there on page three where it would run each day for the next seven.

Praise God, it looked great. Was there anymore she could do?

A parade would be nice, especially if she’d agreed to buying the elephants he’d joked about. But short of that, seemed she needed to retrieve her husband and get ready for the crowds sure to fill their new tent.

That evening, twenty-three souls came to hear the Good News preached which came right after the singing. The Lord definitely inhabited the praises, too.

His presence became so thick when it turned to worship, she thought if she peeked, she might see Jesus Himself walking the aisle.

Neither of the two he anointed with oil and prayed for received their healing instantaneously, but three sinners repented. Nothing better than that—a new believer accepting Jesus’ free will offer of salvation.

The next night, the tent filled to overflowing a few minutes before the advertised start time of six o’clock.

Nathaniel stepped up on the little platform, faced the crowd, and held up his hands. “Folks, the Word says we enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise.”

Signaling Evelyn with a smile, he surrendered the floor. She

closed her eyes and opened her mouth. The song she'd been singing in her heart came forth. For two times through, no one joined in, but she kept going.

After all, it took a couple of run-throughs to learn a new song. She loved it when the Lord gave her new words and melodies to extol the beauty of His Holiness. At the beginning of the third time through, an old man in the back joined in.

Then a few more here and there until the whole congregation sang. After six—or sixty songs, who was counting?—all was well with her soul, and she let the last note drift off.

A sweet hush followed.

For a few minutes, it seemed everyone basked in the afterglow of being in the Lord's presence. No sweeter place in all the world than His manifest presence. Love abounded there. And peace, with an amazing fullness of joy.

"What must I do to be saved?"

Opening her eyes, she looked toward the man asking the frantic question—sounded almost like being chased. He rushed down the aisle from the back door.

Nathaniel stepped toward him. "Repent! And call on the name of the Lord." Late into the night, her husband ministered. He led seven sinners to salvation and prayed for countless more.

After midnight, once the last man left, she scooped up Buddy who'd fallen asleep on the pallet spread over four hours earlier then followed Nathaniel to the trailer.

After tucking her baby in his bed, she found the reverend at the little table, tears streaming. She slipped in across from him. "Praise the Lord. What a beautiful service."

Nodding, he wiped his cheeks. "Amen." He sniffed. "Did you hear what that first man who got saved said?"

"Maybe not."

"Told me he was driving down the road, and the Lord convicted him that he was heading straight to hell. But he didn't know how to stop it. Then somehow, when he passed the tent, said he knew we had the answers he needed. How to get to salvation."

Her own tears threatened. "Bless God. Did you check the offering box?"

He laughed. "Hadn't even thought about it. Have you?"

"Not yet. I just did." She grinned. "Would you mind if I went and got it? I need to know how much is there."

"You need to know?" He wiped his cheek and laughed. "Then by all means, sweetheart! Go."

Bolting out the door, she practically skipped to the box they'd left at the back of the tent, 'tithes and offerings' written on three sides.

Bills—ones and fives at first glance—almost filled it; plenty of coin, too, from its weight.

She carried it back, turned it over on the table, and took to counting. For some reason, her actions seemed to bother her husband.

But he didn't know what she knew.

Finished, she looked up and grinned. "This afternoon while you and Buddy were getting your naps, the Lord told me He would confirm we were in the exact place He wanted us to be with souls saved and provisions made."

His expression completely changed. "How'd we do?"

With the thick stack of bills, she fanned the air.

"Bless the Lord! Seven confessions of faith! Plus three times what we've spent on the mimeograph machine, the Express ad, the parking permit, and everything I paid out on paper and tape . . . down to the thumbtacks! And we've just started!"

"Glory to God Whose mercy endures forever." His eyes belied his sincere praise, looking so troubled.

"What is it, Husband? What's tainting your joy?"

A sigh escaped. "No healings. Past the souls, I'd prayed for miracles. Did you see that little girl in the Radio Flyer wagon?"

The image of the little darling's stunted, bent legs flashed before Evelyn's inner eyes. "Yes, I did. About broke my heart."

"Mine, too." He shook his head. "Bless the Lord. He works in mysterious ways."

"Indeed He does, but it's no mystery at all that we both need sleep. Shall we call it a night? Buddy will have no mercy on us poor sinners at the crack of dawn—or earlier."

Standing, he extended his hand. "You're right again. Have I told you how much I love you, Wife?"

She let him pull her to her feet and into his embrace. "A time or two." She grinned. "But tell me again. Don't you know I love the sound of your voice?"

As she predicted, a small hand shook her shoulder before the first cock's crow. She loved her baby with her whole heart, but one sweet morn, he'd learn to fix his own breakfast and enjoy coloring a few pages.

She needed more sleep.

Keeping her eyes closed, she played possum.

"Mama? I'm awake? Are you?"

"Am now." She kept her eyes closed, hoping against hope he'd crawl up into her bed and cuddle, letting her catch another forty winks. She lifted the blanket. "Want in?"

"I'm hungry. Are you?"

She peeked with her high eye. "Can't I kiss it away?"

He shook his head and playfully tapped the tip of her nose with one finger, grinning. "Kisses ain't candy, but they sure are dandy."

"That's not a real word. Ain't." She held the covers higher. "Come on and snuggle a minute or twelve."

"Am so. I just said it." He slipped in beside her. "My tummy wants bacon and oatmeal and milk, and you can have coffee. How about me and you make a cake? Or a pie? Or . . ."

"Shushhhh. Don't wake Daddy. You want to wait a little while, don't you?" She cuddled him up.

"No, Mama," he whispered. He held her face inches from his with a hand on each cheek. "I need food."

"Fine. I'll get up and fix your breakfast, but no sweets, young man. And you have to be quiet. Understand? Want to color while I cook?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Preparing meals in the trailer's tiny kitchen proved a challenge, but no hill for a stepper. Bless the Lord though. At least she wasn't frying fatback over an open-flame campfire.

Even more folks filed into the tent for that evening's meeting.

The young couple with the little girl in her Radio Flyer came early and took an aisle seat again. The child was beautiful, and her parents looked well-to-do.

Proved money couldn't buy everything. They'd surely give it all for their baby girl to walk.

Buddy caught her attention, jumping over another little boy's back then crouching down for his playmate to take a turn at hopping. He loved leap frog, and having children to play with.

Thankfulness overwhelmed her. Her son was so healthy and had strong legs. She'd taken it for granted. She looked again at the little girl, probably close to the same age.

More souls entered into the Kingdom that night, but no healings.

Her beloved prayed for a few bad backs and a lady burning up with fever, but nothing happened immediately. Again the offering box overflowed without even a mention from the pulpit that it even existed.

After the last worshipers took their leave, her better half joined her in the trailer. "Our permit expires the day after tomorrow, sweetheart. What are your thoughts? Think we should get an extension?"

Opening her notebook, she flipped through its pages. "Here it is. We're not due in San Marcus for a month, but I've not written a single word since we've been here. Kept telling myself I'd have time between this or that."

"But if even one more person gets saved . . ."

She smiled. "What are you thinking? Stay another week? Did you



talk with that young couple with the little girl in the wagon?"

"No, I prayed for her again, but didn't get a chance to visit with her parents."

"The doctors think an operation might fix the girl's legs."

"Do they have the money?"

"I don't know, but I was on the verge of asking when I got a check in my spirit. I think—no, I hope—the Lord is going to heal that baby."

"Amen to that." He stood and extended his hand. "Let's hit the hay. I promised Buddy I'd take him to get donuts in the morning."

She took his hand but didn't let him pull her up. "Nathaniel Nightingale. You spoil that boy something terrible."

With another tug, she relented, ending up in his arms. "Besides, if not for donuts, we wouldn't have won the war."

"And all along I thought we won because America got into it and tipped the balance of power in the Allies' favor."

"That's what they want you to believe. But those volunteers bringing donuts to the front lines . . . that's what did it. Pure and simple; a taste of home. Anyone there knew the truth."

She kissed him hard then leaned back. "Nice story, but our son needs regular food, not so many sweets."

"But you wouldn't want to make me out a liar now, would you? He had me promise that he and his old man would go together." He held a finger up. "And that he could drive."

"So, I'm not invited?"

"Come if you want, but I figured you'd rather sleep. Or you could have the morning to write. If I let him talk me into going by the park . . ."

That sounded good, she had to admit.

And sleep she did. Caught all the way up then wrote a whole new chapter for *Free!* To top off her lovely quiet morning, her guys brought her a sticky, sweet donut which she enjoyed with her last cup of coffee.

Buddy eyed her the whole time. She took extra small bites.

Ended up offering him the second one they'd brought for her, and the gesture elated the child. He smothered her with hugs and kisses! Mercy! Maybe she should sneak him candy, too, like her husband.

But then someone had to be the parent.

The morning was just perfect—until it dawned on her that Milly May should be sharing it with her. She toyed with that notion of a daughter until on the verge of tears then forced herself to focus on the day ahead.

Needed to dress and get herself downtown. That permit wasn't going to fill itself out.

As usual, her husband wanted to be dropped off at the hospital

whenever she had any business to tend. How could she argue? She loved praying for the sick, too. She thought of Miss Ann Lacy, which took her to Pearl.

Writing some missives after she got back would be a good thing. Should have thought of it before so she could have mailed them in town.

Oh, well, couldn't help what she didn't think of.

Besides, dropping her dearest off would keep anyone from knowing how bad of a speller he was. Buddy sat her lap while she waited for the clerk to finish processing her request.

Way longer than it had taken the week before, a man dressed in a cheap suit finally came out and walked over to her. She'd not seen him the last time.

"Mis'ess Nightingale?" He extended an envelope. "Here's your money back, ma'am. Your request has been denied."

What? Why in the world? She kept her hands on her son. "I'm sorry. I don't understand. Denied? Why? Who should I see about this?"

Both his shoulders hiked. "I'm the supervisor, ma'am. I'm afraid there's no appeal." He stuck out the envelope closer, but she didn't take it.

Her face warmed. "Well that doesn't seem right."

With a shrug, he dropped it in the chair next to her. "Ma'am, the sheriff will be notified if you and your husband haven't struck your tent and moved out by tomorrow."

She jumped to her feet. "But why are you doing this? People are getting saved. Lives are being changed. I don't understand."

"There's been numerous complaints, Mis'ess Nightingale. Might even be in your best interest to leave today. I'd hate for anyone to end up getting arrested."

"Arrested? What are you talking about?"

The man huffed then gave her a rather haughty look. "Disorderly conduct will not be tolerated here in San Antonio. We aim to keep the peace." With one last smirk, he turned on his heels and marched back to his office.

Buddy slipped from her arms and retrieved the envelope, tucking it under his arm. “Can we buy more donuts?”



# Chapter Eighteen

His son's shout raised Nathaniel's head. The boy hung out the Runabout's passenger's window, waving and hollering. Something good from the look on his face. Ten steps from the hospital bench he'd been sitting, Buddy held up a sack.

"Donuts, Dad! Mama got us a whole sack!"

How could anyone be morose around his man plant? He opened the Ford's door, picked Buddy up, then got in with the boy on his lap.

"Why were you outside? Something wrong?"

Nodding ever so slightly, he mouthed, later.

During the drive back to the campground, only Buddy said anything, his main focus on getting dinner, so he could have his just desserts.

From a long line of horse traders, he went to negotiating how much he had to eat before diving into the treats. A sticky, sweet donut might be the salve to soothe Nathaniel's troubled soul as well.

After half a bologna sandwich, two of his rings of glorious goodness served with a glass of cool milk, he finally kept his little motor mouth silent, except for a few umms.

Then without a word of protest, the boy succumbed to his need for a nap. Nathaniel stayed prone until sure Buddy was long gone to Sleepy Town then carefully sneaked out of bed.

He found his wife outside, sitting the tent's front row.

She patted the seat beside her. "Want to tell me about the hospital? Or hear my bad news first?"

"Yours. What happened?" He eased in beside her.

"They refused to renew our permit. The head man, no less, told me there'd been numerous complaints, and he'd sic the sheriff on us if we weren't gone by tomorrow."

"Mercy. I basically heard the exact same thing at the hospital. Numerous complaints. I tried to quiz the administrator, but he offered to call the law, too, if I didn't remove myself from the premises."

She hugged herself then jumped to her feet and took to leaping and twirling with her arms fully extended to the sides. He caught her jubilation, extended a hand, then joined in. He whirled her around and around.

After a few minutes—or was it hours?—she gasped then grabbed her knees, sucking great breaths.

How had that so winded him? Bending over, he did the same. "I love being married to a crazy woman. Why were we dancing?"

Grinning ear to ear, she looked up. “We need a big bucket, or . . . Oh, wait! I know! I’ve still got that big Stetson someone left the second night. We can use that.”

Loving that the Lord had literally turned his mourning into dancing, he couldn’t help but wonder why he needed some rancher’s lid? “What for, dearest one?”

Once she told him—he loved it! Loved it!—his feet took to dancing again. But that time, with more wild abandonment like he always suspected King David had danced before the Ark of the Covenant as the priests carried it into Jerusalem.

That evening, the young couple with the crippled girl pulled her into the tent. The child waved. Her smile warmed his heart. They were the first ones to arrive.

Evelyn greeted them then oversaw Buddy pulling the Radio Flyer around the front of the tent, giving that precious child the ride of life.

Nathaniel ushered her folks to the back corner. “There’s something I want you two to do.” He looked to the husband first then his wife. “I believe I’ve heard from the Lord about this, and Evelyn is in agreement.”

The man nodded.

“I want you both to praise the Lord for your daughter’s condition.”

“What?” Tears popped into her eyes and she shook her head. “No! Why would we do that? You’ve seen her! Trudy is four years old, and she can barely crawl! Her doctors say . . . she’ll never walk. Do you understand?”

“I do, but I believe in the healing power of God, too.”

Her eyes implored his then she melted into her husband’s chest. “How can he ask such a thing? Let’s go.”

Nathaniel closed his eyes and bowed his head. “Ma’am, the Word says to praise Him in all things.” He looked up. “Not some or a few things. All. Please don’t go. Just pray about it. We’ll watch over your Trudy while you two seek the Lord.”

The faithful came in droves.

Shame he hadn’t bought a bigger tent, but with the sidewalls rolled up, seemed everyone who wanted to be either stood or sat within earshot.

As before, his wife led the congregation into the Lord’s gates with songs of thanksgiving, then into His courts with praise. Oh, how he loved her new songs and her renditions of the old hymns.

Was there anything he didn’t absolutely adore about his bride?

What a silly question. He’d loved her from the moment he laid eyes on her some thirty-three years before.

Admittedly, it’d been strange back then, to love her like he had—

the years in age difference so paramount. But he'd waited for her to grow up, as she asked, and as she grew, those nine years between them vanished.

Bless God that she'd caught him swilling that bottle of hard liquor.

In retrospect, he clearly was well on his way to being a drunk when she enlisted his promise not to touch the stuff again. One more reason to love her.

Like it was yesterday, her words echoed through time.

"Promise me, for the rest of my natural born days, you will not touch another drop of hard liquor."

Gazing at her, eyes closed, hands lifted toward Heaven as though God Himself was about to lift her, his heart swelled. He'd kept his word. Might not have ever found Jesus if he hadn't.

Definitely would never have been in Los Angeles. He thought of his mother and her miracle then glanced at Trudy's parents.

"Oh, Father, give them Your peace to praise You."

One thing remained for sure and for certain. Evelyn's father would never have allowed her to marry him if he'd kept on drinking. Bless God then, he'd gotten saved on Bonnie Brae Street, and Elijah Eversole actually welcomed him.

The last note drifted off, pulling him from his reflections. The love of his life grinned. He stood. "Folks, I have sad news."

A hush fell over the crowd.

"Tonight is our last service here. The city wouldn't renew our permit."

A collective moan sounded. A few voices offered suggestions.

Holding his hands up, he quieted them. "No, we believe it's God's plan, a sign from Him that we are to move on, so tomorrow, I'll strike the tent, and we'll leave town."

"I've got an empty barn. You can praeach there."

"Bless you, brother, but no." A chuckle escaped. He held his hand out, and Evelyn brought him the hat. "The Lord impressed on me that we need to pass this hat. It was left here, so if it's yours, let me know."

That got a laugh.

Retrieving the wad of greenbacks he'd stuck in his inside coat pocket, he dropped it all into the hat. "Folks, we're doing this a little different tonight. Seek the Lord if you have a need and take out enough to cover it. However much."

"Take it out?"

"Yes, sir, that's what I said. If the Lord impresses you to give, then by all means, obey that small, still voice."

"So you're saying we can take money out of the offering if we need it to pay a bill, preacher? Or buy a new pair of shoes?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's exactly right. If it's a need." He stepped off

the platform and handed the hat to the end man on the front row. "Evelyn, will you bless us with a song?"

Only took three times through the tune for the hat to make it back with what appeared to be way more money than before. He took it. The Lord spoke to his heart. He listened for a bit then faced the congregation.

"Folks, there's several of you who are in real need, and I don't think you took out what you should have. Don't be embarrassed. This is the Lord meeting your need. Haven't you been praying?"

A murmur passed through the congregation.

"Please don't deny His provision. Now I'm sending this hat back out. Grab hold of His blessing, don't miss it. You might even keep those of us who gave from our blessings!"

Another song that everyone knew rose to the sky as the hat made its rounds again. That time, it came back almost empty.

"That's better." He set it on the edge of the platform. "It'll be right there until we're done." He held his hands out. "Anyone need salvation?"

Twelve souls came forward and prayed, repenting and receiving the greatest gift ever given. Twice that many rededicated their lives to Jesus. However long it took, instead of the crowd dwindling, its numbers seemed to grow.

Had someone spread the word of a crazy old preacher giving money away?

A warmth spread over his soul. He searched the crowd until he found the crippled girl's father. He asked with his eyes of the man's decision. The fellow nodded then hollered out. "My daughter has polio. Praise the Lord!"

His wife looked up at him and the chains fell away. "Yes!" she hollered with even more enthusiasm. "Bless the Lord! My daughter's legs are bent! Though she's never taken a step in her life, I will praise Him."

A stunned silence filled the tent.

Then Nathaniel joined in shouting God's praise. He grabbed his bottle of oil and ran to the back of the tent. "Pray, folks! Join me in the prayer of faith."



"See if your new friend wants to color."

Buddy looked at the old man with funny white hair. "Sure." He



turned toward the crowd of folks gathered around the Radio Flyer. Through all the grownups' legs, the girl's face shone bright.

He leaned one way then the next and held up and waved his book and crayons at her.

Grinning, she nodded.

Leaving his other stuff, he jumped to his feet. With a little slip there and a wiggle here, he worked his way through the forest of big people.

Everyone was acting so strange; even his parents. Some of them hollered loud. Others cried like babies.

All around his friend, they shouted praises to God.

He liked doing that and shouted with them on his way toward her. "Nobody like God!"

Tears ran down Trudy's mama's cheeks. She sat on her knees next to the wagon with her hands raised toward Heaven.

Buddy waved at his friend. "Come on and color with me. It ain't so noisy up front. I got a pallet."

She smiled real big and nodded. He grabbed the wagon's tongue, but it didn't roll. Instead, Trudy's legs came over the Flyer's side. She stretched her hand out toward him. Dropping the handle, he took it and pulled her forward.

Her mother and some other ladies screamed. "No!"

But Trudy kept smiling, so he kept on pulling.

One foot cleared the wagon and hit the ground.

Her other leg swung around and over the side. She put that foot down.

Lots of folks gasped.

Teetering a little, Trudy took one step. Then two.

He quit pulling and stepped toward her, let her steady herself on his shoulder.

All the big people went nuts. Hollering and laughing.

He couldn't hear what his new friend said over all the noise.

Letting go of her hand, he stuck his fingers in his ears. She laughed and did the same.

With her hand on his shoulder, he steered her toward the front.

Like a bunch of wild Indians or a Red Rooster's band of pirates in one of MayMee's books who found a big treasure box, they all took to whooping and hollering and dancing around.

Seemed Mama and Trudy's mother led the charge.

A circle widened around him and her. He'd never seen such a sight, and for a minute, he forgot all about coloring.

He ogled the grownups carrying on, then Trudy put her mouth to his ear. "Have you got another book?"

"Not here." He faced her. "We can color on the same page. If you

want to.”

“I’d like that.” She reached for his hand, and he slipped his into hers. She pulled him toward where he’d left his Crayolas.

Not soon enough, everyone quieted down a little and left him and Trudy in peace. She could color real good.

When the page looked beautiful and finished, he had a great idea. “Hey! How about giving me a ride? Looks like fun riding in your wagon.”

“Sure.” She pushed herself up. “Come on. Let’s go.”



Salvations, miraculous healings, and all those lives rededicated to the Lord melted Nathaniel onto the front bench. Evelyn joined him.

“What a night! Bless God! I’ll never forget it, seeing it with my own eyes. He’s so amazing, so great and so good.”

“Amen. That’s true.” He patted her knee. “No wonder the devil stirred up whoever it was to kick me out of the hospital and deny that permit. Can you imagine what kind of crowd we’d have tomorrow if we could stay?”

“Milton said he’d build us a church.”

“Who’s that?”

“Trudy’s father. Uh, the little girl who grew some new legs tonight. The one the Lord healed.” She giggled.

“Don’t get smart with me, Wife.” He loved her so much, loved it that night after night, when all the people left, she stayed. Smart, funny, and prettier than anything he’d ever laid eyes on.

“You need to listen better when people tell you their names.” She reached up and changed the direction of a few of his hairs. “Anyway, he and his brothers own a construction company, and he has acreage on the river.”

Sounded tempting. San Antonio was a historic and beautiful town, but . . .

“No. Great as it sounds, he didn’t call me to pastor a church. I know my place in the Kingdom. I’m an evangelist. Maybe one day, but I’d have to have a strong Word from the Lord . . . some kind of powerful sign.”

“Did you notice the hat?”

“No. What about it?”

“Overflowing with cash.”

“Bless God. His mercy endures forever.”

Next morning, the sound of many voices pulled him from the etheric place where he'd been languishing after his wife slipped out of bed. Surely, the coffee would be ready.

But who was doing all that talking? She wasn't in the kitchen. He peeked out the window. A small army scurried around out there, carrying stuff to the trailer.

Throwing on his work clothes, he joined the jubilant mob the Lord had sent to help him. In less than an hour, everything was packed and ready to go—would've taken him and Evelyn all day.

Bless the Lord and forget not all His benefits.

His sweet wife took the Runabout to check for any mail and to give the postmaster the forwarding address for any general delivery. He loved her gift for details.

Where would he be without her?

She returned with a sack of donuts for the trip, and the goodbyes began.

Amidst tears and hugs and blessings, he and his took leave of the Alamo City, his wallet fuller than when he crossed into the city's boundary, but so much better were the twenty-two souls added to the Kingdom for eternity.

Glory bumps covered his arms and legs, remembering the precious crippled girl God had healed.

There was no one like the Lord. None to compare.

The Runabout's dust cloud increased as Evelyn sped ahead. He shifted the truck into high gear and matched her breakneck speed.

His crazy lady had to be doing thirty-five at least, but if he slowed down, she might not look back for five miles or better, so he pressed a bit more on the gas pedal.

"Steady as you go, me matie."

Buddy sat a bit taller in his lap but kept the truck right where it needed to be. "Aye-aye, Captain."

Potholes slowed her down for a stretch, then shortly, rain drops the size of robin eggs pelted the windshield. Good thing he'd insisted on her keeping the Runabout's top up.

Instead of the Tin Can Tourist stop not five miles ahead, she pulled off the highway at a sign that read New Braunfels. Two turns and maybe half a mile along a nice-sized river later, she pulled her sedan right in front of a hotel.

He stopped on the road and set the brake but kept the motor idling.

What was his wife thinking? Retrieving his slicker from behind the seat, he slung it over him and his boy, then trotted to the Runabout and hopped in. He raised a brow. "Why are we here? Something wrong?"

“Didn’t you see their billboard? This hotel has private baths in each room.” She closed then opened her eyes ever so slowly.

Could he be reading her right? The implications thrilled his heart. “So, you’re wanting to stay here?”

“I am.”

“What about you, Son?”

“Will Trudy and the old man come?”

Evelyn reached over and patted his arm. “Not Trudy, she’s back in San Antonio, dear. What man are you talking about?”

“You know. That really old guy with the funny hair.” Buddy held his hands out from each side of his head. “I liked his eyes. And him colors real good.”

Tears threatened to overflow. Nathaniel shook his head side to side. “I don’t think he’ll be here either.”

“Oh, why not?”



# Chapter Nineteen

The chuckle threatened to erupt, but Evelyn managed to stifle it. Her husband tickled his son then nuzzled his neck. "I'm not sure, but I think he went home."

The boy held his peace until the bellboy put the bags down, accepted his gratuity, then backed out.

"Hey." He tugged on her dress. "How about me and you going back? We can get Trudy and her wagon." He grinned. "Did you see her pulling me around?"

"I did. But we're not having another meeting tonight."

"Why not?" He ducked his head. "I really like that Radio Flyer." He looked up. "I want one. You can buy it for me."

She looked to his daddy who shrugged. "How about you earning it?"

"Sure! The old man says I'm a good worker." He hugged his daddy's leg. "Ain't I?"

"Absolutely."

"Great then. Let's say, one week of going to bed—in your bed—on time, eating all your vegetables, and putting all your clothes away? And no splashing your bath water."

He pursed his lips. Who had he seen do that when horse trading? Folding his arms over his chest. Was it inbred? He looked so much like his daddy or Grandpa Charley.

The little guy shrugged then held up one finger. "One day. Week's too long."

She bit her lip and somehow kept a straight face. "Two weeks then."

He stomped his foot. "No, Mama. You say three. I say two. Then we shake." He stuck out his hand and shot her a sly grin—the same one his daddy had on his face at that very moment.

"Fine. One week then. And if you can keep your word, we'll go wagon shopping after three days."

Sticking out his hand, he beamed. "Deal."

She shook but sealed it with a kiss and a hug.

True to the agreement, he ate all his peas and carrots at dinner as well as his green beans at supper. He folded his shirt and trousers then bathed as though if he created any wake, it would swamp him—or rather his wagon.

Then to the second—not that he had a clock or knew how to tell time, he trusted his father though—the boy crawled into his bed.

When she tucked him in, he didn't make a peep.

A little later, she peeked in on him. Just as she suspected, ten minutes of him being still and quiet and poof! He'd conked out. She turned. Her husband held out his arm. "I like the way you horse trade, lady."

Covering her mouth, she snickered then walked into his embrace. "I'll be back. I'm having myself a nice hot tub bath."

Slipping into bed, she eased onto his outstretched arm, laying her head on his broad chest, and closed her eyes. Life was so good. God was so good. But . . . She nudged his rib. "Hey, it isn't fair."

"What's not fair?"

"The angel. You've seen him. Your parents have seen him. And now my son has seen him, but I still haven't. Do you really think . . .?"

He didn't respond, but what could he say? Wasn't like he could make the wild-haired angel show on demand so she could see him.

"Oh, I almost forgot. We've got to go back to Austin."

"Why?"

"When I picked up the mail there was one from Beth, my editor wants another chapter, and I need to ask Pearl about Poppy."

"You talking about Auntie Sweetie Pie? I liked Jules calling the baby that."

"Me, too, and yes. Beth wants a meeting with Poppy and Carter Hightower."

"Mercy. Talk about drama. What if she says it never happened?"

"I don't know." She snuggled in and hugged him. "I love you, Husband. How about you taking Buddy on a scouting mission tomorrow?"

"What are we hunting?"

"A wagon, silly."



"Anything you say, my love." Nathaniel pulled her in tighter. "I can do that. What are your plans?"

"I've got an appointment with Mister Underwood."

"Ah." He nodded then remembered in the darkness, she couldn't see him. "How many chapters am I behind?"

"Six, but you've been busy."

"When's your deadline?"

"We have four more months."

"I'd be happy to keep the coast clear for you tomorrow. Want me to go ahead and buy him his wagon if we find one?"

"No, not at all. Let's make him wait. Patience is a virtue, you

know.”

Nathaniel held his peace but wondered how many donuts it would take to buy Buddy off if he found a Radio Flyer.

The next morning after leaving each store, Nathaniel praised the Lord.

His son, however, seemed all the more determined to locate his prize. A pretty face could sidetrack him from his mission, but only long enough for him to judge said female against his mother’s beauty.

“Mama’s the most beautiful girl in the world, ain’t she?” He looked up, leaving the umpteenth establishment.

“She is indeed, Son. That’s a fact.”

It bothered Nathaniel some that the boy even cared about a woman’s looks at his tender age. He saw so much of his own father in Buddy, but it also pleased him.

His Pa was flawed as all men were, but a body would have to hunt high and low to find a better role model, especially after Bonnie Bray Street.

What a night that had been, and that next day . . . maybe even better.

“Hey! Let’s look over there!” Buddy pointed toward a café across the street. “Maybe they gots one.”

“Sure. You getting hungry?”

He grinned. “Think they have donuts?”

“Maybe. But remember the deal. Clean your plate of everything, no pushing your broccoli around and sneaking Brussel sprouts into your pockets.”

Touching his cheek to his off shoulder, his son looked at him rather sheepishly. “I love you.”

“I sure do love you, too.” He extended his hand. “Come on. What say we eat us some dinner?”

“Sounds great!” Buddy grabbed three fingers and tugged. “I say amen!”

The waitress proved cute enough and the grub good enough to distract his son for almost a solid half hour, but once his belly got full, with another proclamation that she couldn’t beat his mother’s beauty, Buddy determined the time had come to resume the search.

Praise the Lord that he hadn’t said aloud who he was comparing.



The door creaked open. Evelyn looked over the Underwood. Nathaniel, with Buddy draped over his shoulder, strolled in and soft-



shoed his way to the back bedroom.

Shortly, he returned and dragged a chair over, sitting next to her. "How's it going?"

"Really well." She stretched her arms toward the ceiling, then a little further. "I knocked out two more chapters this morning."

"Excellent. I was wondering if you'd written about the day after I got saved."

She nodded. "I have. That scene's in one of the chapters you haven't read yet." She nodded toward the bedroom. "You two locate a wagon?"

"No, but not from lack of trying. When that boy puts his mind to a thing . . ." He chuckled. "A few pretty faces distracted him momentarily, but once he judged them poor seconds to his most lovely mother, the hunt for the Flyer was back on."

With some inner need to hide her soul's windows, she ducked her gaze.

"A bit vainglorious?"

She looked up. He'd found her out. What could she do but confess? "Guilty as charged. And it's all my fault that he even plays the game."

"How's that?"

Though she tried to not say, certainly didn't want to reveal . . . "Oh, he'd pointed out a pretty lady, and . . . uh . . . I whispered in his ear and asked if she was prettier than me." She shrugged. "I stopped asking after only a few times, but he kept volunteering his opinions on the matter."

Her dear husband stood then pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. For the longest, he only hugged her, then he leaned back, grinning.

"Pa always said it wasn't bragging if a thing was true, only stating facts. And my love, you are the most stunning creature the Lord ever breathed the breath of life into."

"Oh, Nathaniel."

"And your heart . . . it's even more amazing than your physical features. Your grace and mercy are surpassed only by the Lord's. Sometimes, I can't believe He gave you to me, created you to be my wife."

"No, don't." She shook her head. "I love hearing you say it, and I'm certainly thrilled that you feel that way, but no. I'm almost forty-one and I see these beautiful younger ladies. Their skin is . . ."

He kissed her quiet, hugged her even tighter, then moved his mouth to her ear. "Sorry, but the jury is in. Buddy and I already pronounced you the winner, so don't be trying to say otherwise."

"I love you, Husband."

“See? See how blessed and highly favored I am? I love you too, dearest wife, more than life itself. More today than yesterday, but not as much as tomorrow.”

Allowing one more kiss, she then pushed him away. “We both have work to do, and his naps seem to be getting shorter by the day.”

Offering his best little boy grin, he shrugged. “Where’s the manuscript?”

Minutes ticked away with her typing, his editing, and Buddy lollygagging in Sleepy Town. What a lovely day the Lord had made for her.



His wife’s rhythmic staccato of typewriter keys striking inked ribbon onto clean white paper faded from Nathaniel’s consciousness as her story drew him back to those most wonderful of times—except she’d not told the whole story.

Probably didn’t know it. He’d never told her, and for sure and for certain didn’t want it known.

He reached the end of the chapter—as she’d written it, but that day fourteen years before drew him back to that big sale barn . . .

Nathaniel relaxed in the saddle as his father took off his hat. How many times had he done the exact same thing?

Right in the middle of negotiations, acted like he needed to mop his brow, then instead, flung his Stetson at the horse’s hooves.

Of course, the gelding didn’t flinch.

But why would he?

Either he or his Pa had been throwing something at the three-year-old for months.

The buyer shook his head. “Charley, what can I say? You and your boy there sure train them right.”

His Pa stuck out his hand. “Tell you what. We’ll take three hundred ten. You can keep him or make a quick buck if you want. At that price, you can’t go wrong.”

The man laughed then stuck out his hand. “Then tell me why I feel like I just got scalped?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t skinned anyone’s hair in years.”

Nathaniel had his saddle and bridle off and the gelding in line with the man’s string of new purchases before the bill of sale was written or the money changed hands.

A part of him would miss the buying and selling, but the Lord had

given him a new heart . . . and a burden for the lost that couldn't be denied.

What he'd experienced . . . so wonderful . . . he had to share with as many as he could reach.

His Pa shook the man's hand one last time then joined him. "One more happy customer." He held out half the money.

Nathaniel pocketed the cash, filled his lungs, then offered what he hoped looked like a smile. Would he understand? "We need to talk."

"Sure." His father nodded toward the barn's side door. "That café down the street has a right nice blue plate special. Fancy some dinner?"

"I could eat."

Nathaniel waited until pie and coffee to share his heart.

"Is Evelyn good with staying?"

"Yes, sir. We talked most of the night, and . . ." He smiled. "Never could understand you and Ma—and all the rest—wanting to go to church or read your Bibles, especially the way you two treated each other."

"Praise the Lord, that's all over now. What about last night? Wasn't it something?"

"I'll say. Never in all my born days, never knew God could be so awesome."

"Did you hear that lady praying in Comanche?"

"I heard lots of people talking in all kinds of strange sounding tongues. What was she saying?"

"Oh, mostly telling me exactly how the cow ate my cabbage. Yet all smiles with her hands stretched toward Heaven like she was talking straight to God."

"Don't guess I did." He chuckled. "Did you hear the lady singing in Hebrew?"

"You speak the Jew's tongue?"

"No, course not. But somehow, I understood every word. Had no idea what language it was until the old man with wild white hair told me."

His father stared at him for a bit. "An old gentleman with hair that haloed his head and eyes so kind they warm your heart just looking at him?"

"Yes, sir. That's him to a tee. You know him?"

His father nodded. "Met him when I was four. Your grandpap and Wallace Rusk were taking me and Ma back to Red River County. They'd rescued us a month or so before.

"You've got quite a story, Pa."

"Anyway, about a week before we got home, a bunch of folks was having church every night. Wallace went with your grandmothers and

me. Levi Baylor wasn't saved then. He went but hung back in the shadows."

"This guy didn't look that old. What makes you think it was the same one?"

"We think he's an angel."

"Really? Why?"

His father related some of the stories he'd heard before and a few he hadn't. Where he'd always discounted them, with the old guy being an angel, they all made sense. Gooseflesh rose on his arms and legs. He'd spoken with an angel? Wow.

"So you and Ma are good? Neither one of you will have my shoulder to cry on."

"Of course. I've known all along she never loved Jed. That she . . . uh . . ." His father leaned in closer. "Like you know, I've done way worse than her." He hiked his off shoulder. "You and Evelyn weren't the only ones talking late."

"Oh yeah?"

"Anyway, after that camp meeting services were over way back then, the old man—Mister Dithers if you want to give him a name—gave your grandmother a prophecy about me. Last night, it came true."

"Really? How so? What happened?"

"The note said I'd live a hard life, and that's surely been true. But his prophecy added I'd eventually choose the sweet over the bitter. And that's what I did last night. So did your mother. We'll be fine, Son. Better than ever."

"Good." Nathaniel leaned in even closer. "Always figured you'd get yourself hung over killing Jed Briggs. Praise the Lord, you didn't."

"Wanted to plenty of times, but instead . . . well, you know what I was doing. So don't forget I was the one started it all."

"Never could understand you running off with Leland's mother. I mean . . . Marah was one handsome lady, but . . ."

"Stupid runs in our family, Son. So be careful. You know about the first Charles Nightingale."

"Yes, sir."

The waitress came, but instead of making eyes and flirting as he was wont to do in the past, he only glanced up and held out his coffee cup. Once the lady left, he looked at Nathaniel instead of staring at the woman's backside.

"Speaking of your brother, I've been praying for him for years, but as far as I know, he isn't saved. You ever get a chance, share what the Lord did for you."

"Yes, sir, gladly. When you get home, ask around. I'd like to sell my timberland."

“Why would you do a thing like that? Right nice piece of coin every year without lifting a finger.”

“True, but I’d rather not live off my wife while we’re figuring out exactly what we’re going to do.”

“I’ll ask around. You’re not thinking on selling your house and farmland, are you?”

“Not just yet. But who knows where the Lord will take us?”

Movement in his peripheral brought Nathaniel back to the present, a Buddy-sized shadow crept along the room’s wall, without turning his head he cut his eyes in that direction, his son held his finger to his lips as he snuck past his mother.

“My father never could sneak up on his old man either.” He grinned at Buddy.

The boy’s shoulders slumped. “Aww, I thought today was the day.”



# Chapter Twenty

With strength renewed and fifteen chapters of the rough draft in her satchel, Evelyn bid the lovely hotel on the Guadalupe River a fond farewell.

As usual, her son chose to ride with his father, but she'd known from the first Nathaniel was the boy's favorite. If the Lord ever saw fit to bless her with another daughter . . .

Oh, how she would dote on the little darling! Dress her in the latest fashions. And hats! She would have so much fun picking out hats for her baby girl. For sure and for certain, the child would be hers, her heartbeat.

Could she ever be fully herself without a daughter?

That'd make it the boys against the girls. She grinned at the thought.

What joy a baby girl would be for the family. Playing all sorts of games and . . . a pang nipped her heart.

If only Milly May had lived.

But she hadn't, and no one could do anything about it.

For a moment, she allowed her thoughts to linger on her dead daughter, remember holding her in her arms, kissing her brow . . . her smell.

But dwelling on those things—however sweet—proved toxic, so she put them back into the recesses, the dark place with all her unfulfilled wishes and dashed hopes for her daughter and closed the door.

Should the Lord never see fit to give her another baby, she would praise Him. He knew the desires of her heart. A lone tear trickled down her cheek.

Her concentration should be on her driving, not something out of her hands. If the roads held and the creeks didn't rise, she should make Austin before nightfall. Nathaniel wouldn't allow her to drive in the dark.

Not that she much wanted to. Even with the Runabout's headlamps, motoring in the dark seemed ill-advised.

No need for concern. She beat the sun by a good half hour.

Once her men had the truck and trailer parked in its spot at the Tin Can Tourist Park, she relinquished control of the Ford to her own personal chauffeur. He and his wheel man carried her away from it all to a favorite hash house of hers.

He didn't like for her to drive in the dark, so how come he considered it just fine for him—with Buddy in his lap—to motor

anywhere he wanted no matter the time of day?

Next morning, she dropped the men off in front of the Woolworth's to renew their search for a Radio Flyer and called on Miss Pearl.

As previously arranged, her husband strolled into the downtown diner pulling Buddy in his brand-spanking-new wagon. If her baby smiled any bigger, he'd surely split his face in two. He stood up and held his arms out.

"Look at me, Mama! We found my Flyer. Ain't it the bees' knees?"

How had he learned to talk like that? "Yes, dear. It's lovely. So shiny and red; very nice, indeed."

He nodded agreement then after a brief protest—why couldn't he eat in his wagon?—agreed to take his seat at the table and have some dinner. It took only one look from his father to silence the debate.

The little booger.

Once the waitress took the orders, Nathaniel patted Evelyn's hand. "So? Tell me. Did Auntie Sweetie Pie ever meet her father?"

"Miss Pearl remembered a little about it, but what would you say about going to Dallas for a little research? Get the story straight from the horse's mouth."

"We could do that. Before or after Hico?"

She checked her mental calendar. "We've got time. If we stopped by there on the way, we could leave the truck and trailer with Robert and Helen. You and your wheelman could squire us north."

Grinning, he leaned in close. "Have you got enough cash to cover our meal?"

Wow, had the wagon really cost that much? She nodded. "Why? Didn't you leave out with over—"

"There was this man."

"Him was a hobo, Mama, but Daddy told him about Jesus then gave that hobo all his money."

She filled her lungs then exhaled. How could she say anything?

Her dearest's heart literally overflowed with generosity. Some might say to a fault, but . . . no buts! The Lord continually proved Himself the unfailing source of her little family.

Not one thing would she change about her husband.

Well, maybe she'd have him be more of a parent to her son and less of a boon-bud. Still . . . even that was endearing.

The food came and went. Buddy cleaned his plate without being told. It appeared wagon hunting generated a healthy appetite. After paying the bill, she looked into her husband's eyes and gave him her best little girl in distress expression.

Keeping his face blank for longer than she thought possible, he finally grinned. "What now?"



“What do you mean, what now? I was just thinking . . . if I could have the afternoon to write . . . While visiting with Miss Pearl, it hit me that I need to go back and add a chapter or at least a part of one anyway, and I’d really like to get it on paper before . . . but you two found the wagon already, and I know I’ve been spending—”

“Say no more, except, before what?”

“Get it down before I decide not to write it.”



How could Nathaniel object? He’d already spent a lot of the advance money from her second novel. “How much more cash do you have?”

Coyly, she touched her chin to her shoulder, making one of his favorite expressions, and batted her eyelashes. “Some. How much do you need?”

Did she ever give him a straight answer when it concerned how many dollars she had stashed away in all of her purse’s hidey holes? “Enough to rent a couple of horses.”

“Yes, Mama! We want to go riding. Please say yes! It’ll be the monkey’s eyebrows.”

Praise the Lord, she found a hideaway sawbuck, how much more only she knew.

Monkey’s eyebrows indeed, maybe for his son, but sitting a horse always brought mixed emotions for Nathaniel. Shame his father couldn’t have lived longer, but the Good Book said how it was assigned for every man to die once, then judgement.

Praise God Pa had been reconciled with the Lord and Ma before leaving the world.

He’d been a different man after Bonnie Brae.

If they went as far as Dallas, a trip home might be in order. Be good to see his mother, and hopefully, he could get through to his big brother. He’d hate to think that Harold would miss Heaven.

If only he’d have come to California and experienced the move of the Holy Spirit . . .

Poor Buddy got too tired to steer and slid off his lap, slumping next to him.

Didn’t get back to the trailer until dark-thirty with the wagon-riding cowboy nothing but dead weight. He slipped into the tiny metal abode with his son draped over his shoulder.

Sure surprised him Evelyn didn’t turn around and greet him, just

kept on pounding on the Underwood.

After tucking Buddy in, Nathaniel pulled off his boots then sock-footed, sidled up next to his wife.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she continued to type. He leaned in, but she didn't look at him.

Picking up the stack of pages on the table next to her, he began to read.



*Free! Free Indeed!* He loved that title. Chapter Sixteen.

Evelyn tugged on her husband's arm. He lifted his head, but stayed on his knees, shooting her a quizzical look. She nodded outside then extended her hand. At the door of the old stable, he looked back, then exited the building.

"Something wrong?"

Closing her eyes, she fought to keep her composure and shook her head. "I . . . don't know . . . Yes. Maybe. I don't know what it is, but something's amiss. For hours now, there's been a shadow hovering over me. It's weighing me down. But then a few minutes ago, it . . ."

Tears overflowed.

"Oh, Nathaniel, something bad is about to happen, and I don't know what to do or where to run. I only know we can't stay here."

He pulled her to himself and wrapped his arms around her. "Let's go upstairs to the prayer room and seek the Lord. See if He'll give us some direction."

"Think we can get in there? Has someone cleaned it up?"

"Yesterday. A couple of us carried all the stuff out." He followed her up the rough hewn stairs.

For several minutes, he held her hand and sought the Lord. She only listened. The room, once cluttered with tack and broken saddles and such, vanished, and she found herself back in her childhood room in San Francisco.

Queenie, instead of being her usually good dog self, whined and pulled on Evelyn's hand.

"What, girl? What are you trying to tell me?"

The room melted into the old barn's stall at the orphanage where her Twinkle Toes lived out his life, giving the children rides, but instead of his usual calm, the Shetland snorted and struck the ground.

Rearing, he pawed the air then stomped the ground, twirling with his tail and mane flying.

Someone screamed. Hundreds—if not thousands—joined in hollering and running around like mad men or worse.

Chaos reigned.

Fires erupted.

Smoke filled the streets so thick, she couldn't see the sky, but she forced her eyes to stay open. Then somehow, thank God, He took her back to the prayer room on Azusa Street.

Below, over two hundred believers worshiped the Lord in various and sundry ways.

No fire or panic or black smoke as far as she perceived.

Nathaniel rose up, pushed himself to his feet, and offered her his hand. "We need to go."

"Where?"

"San Francisco. Something horrible is about to happen."

"Do you know what?"

"No, but we can't lollygag."

Like that April day had been dipped in molasses, getting a carriage from the hotel to train station took forever. The horse never broke beyond a trot.

The ticket clerk moved in slow motion, like a slug, triple stamping the tickets, double counting the cash. She stifled numerous outbursts demanding speed. Finally, the train chugged out of the station.

Nathaniel patted her hand. "We'll be there in the morning."

She took some solace from his calmness.

Oh, how she loved the change in him.

How could she have been so blind before? But then, if she'd refused to marry him until he accepted the Lord, where would he be? He would never have gone to Bonnie Brae.

Would she be sitting there with him?

Would she have even been in Los Angeles to witness the great move of the Holy Spirit?

Bless the Lord, none of that mattered anymore. She had married him, been there to talk him into going to Bonnie Brae, then saw it all with her own eyes to testify of God's great power.

Smiling, she elbowed him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And exactly what am I getting thanked for?"

"Hopefully, chasing this wild goose with me."

His own lips tried, but no mirth showed. Instead, only concern. But he spoke no curses on her hometown. Whatever he'd seen or sensed, he kept his own counsel. She for sure and for certain didn't want him speaking any evil or ill tidings.

Apprehension troubled her own spirit plenty enough.

Late that night, the train slowed, then eased to a stop on a side track a half-mile outside San Jose.

After converting the bench seats into sleeping berths, the conductor informed her husband the train would resume its journey at six the next morning.

Why couldn't they go on?

Why the delay? Only a few miles separated her and her parents in San Francisco, but . . . she wouldn't want to disturb them at such a late hour anyway. Tomorrow morning would do, and . . . staying on the train saved the cost of a hotel room.

At precisely twelve minutes after five o'clock the next morning, the first shockwave hit. For the next eighty-four seconds, the world shook.

Twice, she thought the train would tip over, but each time—as though God's own hand steadied the iron horse—the Pullman remained upright.

What seemed like hours of silent calm passed, though most likely only a few seconds. The screams became deafening. She found yesterday's dress. Nathaniel already buttoned his shirt.

Outside and up the tracks a little ways, the station tilted toward the sea. Past that, the town lay in ruins.

Explosions rocked the early morn.

Fires sprung up before her eyes. Folks ran to and fro, creating bucket lines. Others stood and gawked as though dazed, certainly useless. Poor people.

Realization dawned on her, and the scream she'd held back escaped. "Oh, no! Mama! Daddy!"

It took Evelyn and her husband four days to cover the fifty-four miles from San Jose to San Francisco. If she hadn't urged him on, it would have been weeks—if not months.

Bless her kind-hearted optimist. He tried to convince her that her parents weren't dead. Exactly as the poet claimed, hope truly springs eternal.

Still . . . in her gut . . . she knew otherwise. With Mama at seventy and her father eighty on his next birthday . . . Well, if they had survived the initial quake, surely the aftermath would have done them in. She hated to think they'd been alone.

If only she could have been there, lived closer.

Along the way, her dearest led six souls to the Lord, and with her own eyes, she witnessed seven bona fide healings.

Shame she didn't have one of those Browning cameras to take before and after pictures. But then who'd want to memorialize all the devastation and destruction everywhere around?

For the princely sum of fifty dollars cash—praise the Lord, Nathaniel had the dollars—he paid a farmer for seats on the back of his wagon to ride the last ten miles into the heart of the city.

Had she ever been so footsore . . . or dirty . . . or hungry?

From a good distance, the sight of the first house on her street standing tall with only

minimal damage quickened her heart.

Could there be hope after all?

The closer she got though, the smoke that hovered toward the lane's far end choked back her elation. Her heart boomed against her ribs.

Without a look back to thank the farmer, she hopped down, and her feet took to running. She passed the Barkleys' columned colonial she'd always thought looked like President Washington's home.

Then, instead of her parents' beautiful three-story Greek Revival . . . a smoldering pile of rubble remained right where it had stood.

Her heart sank. She couldn't swallow or breathe.

Mama.

Daddy.

Was that their grave? Were they in the mound that used to be her home?

Nathaniel caught up and wrapped his arm around her. "There's still a chance. Maybe they weren't home. Let's go find Susie. She'll know."

Evelyn shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks.

For the longest, he held her as she wept. Finally, she found her voice.

"They didn't have any plans. Remember Mama begging us to come back after the horse sale in Los Angeles? They'd canceled their trip to Paris on account of Daddy not feeling up to it."

"Things change. They might have been at the Mercy House. Come on. Let's find Susie or Francy—any of the cousins. Surely they would've checked early on. Someone will know something."



"You go on. I'm staying." She wiped her cheeks and stepped toward the ruins, then looked back. "Hire some help if you can find any."

Nathaniel put the last page down, his own tears threatening. She stared at him with the same look she always wore before he delivered his verdict on her written words. But that day, he couldn't tease her.

How had she been able to get it on paper?

"Sweetheart. It's awesome. How much are you going put in about that time?"

She hiked both shoulders and curled her bottom lip a smidgen. How could she make such a small, routine gesture so graceful and intoxicating?

"I'm not sure. By the time we found their bodies and got them buried, the rest . . . Well, thought I might skip it. Not much drama. You know?"

"What about finding your collection of MayMee's first editions unscathed?"

Oh, how the Lord had blessed her with those treasures in the midst of the devastation. He loved God all the more for those precious gifts to his beloved.

"Wasn't that something?" She leaned in and planted an extra wet one right on his kisser. "Shame your son took it upon himself to color all over the very first Red Rooster book."

“Oh? So he’s my son now?”

Wiggling her eyebrows, she nodded and grinned extra big.

“Why, yes! Of course he is. And you know it, too. But what I’d like for him to be is a big brother. Please, Nathaniel. I don’t think I can stand it if I don’t have a daughter.”

Oh, Lord. Why was she starting up that baby business again?



# Chapter Twenty-one

Evelyn zoomed by the Austin city limits sign, glanced at it again in the rearview mirror then focused on her men. Buddy, as always, sat his father's lap, steering the truck that pulled the trailer toward what only the Lord knew lay ahead.

Pushing against the steering wheel, she stretched as best she could, so glad of the respite in the state's capital.

The Hill Country's fall color against all the beautiful dark green of the old live oaks always warmed her heart. Her baby had his birthday there—hard to believe he turned five.

The afternoon with his father at the grand Capitol building seemed to be his favorite part of the celebration and offered her a few hours of quiet, uninterrupted writing.

What a productive break, too! Besides the much-needed rest, three full chapters almost wrote themselves. Took their toll on her though.

Had she ever cried so much over a work in progress? She hated reliving those terrible days, but for sure and for certain, loved telling hers and Nathaniel's story.

Harcourt contracted for two novels, but if the partners didn't like that one, there were plenty of other houses out there she figured would snap it up, especially with the growing Nightingale fame—hers and her husband's.

Hardly a day passed anymore that someone didn't recognize him from one of the meetings, or her for her growing title list.

She loved it, loved her life, loved her husband and son.

If only her Milly May had lived. Or if God would bless her with . .

.

She refused to go there.

So many disappointing months passed, and she still wasn't expecting. Not from lack of trying though. Poor Nathaniel—oh sure, poor guy! Mirth chased her sorrow and sadness away, and she giggled.

She loved him so much, and beyond a shadow of doubt, he adored her.

Why, she'd wrapped him around her little finger over thirty-three years ago, since he was only a boy. God blessed her so. Just not with another baby.

While she totally understood why Sarah sent Hagar to Abraham, she also remembered how that story ended. There'd be no Ishmael in her life—or Nathaniel's.

Checking the rearview mirror again, she laughed out loud. Good thing she drove alone because her husband wouldn't let up until he

knew what tickled her.

Plus, the last time she mentioned a baby girl, he'd acted exactly like Jacob when Rachel demanded a child, get all angry and lay it off on God.

Only took two days to make the hundred and twenty-eight miles from the state's capital to Hico. Helen and Bob fell all over themselves, obviously thrilled to have the great Nathaniel Nightingale park his truck and trailer behind their church building.

It'd be good advertisement for next month's revival.

From there on to Dallas, then east by northeast to Red River County—home for him and some very pleasant memories for her.

Plenty of not so happy ones, too, for the many funerals attended over the years. They all blurred, save for PawPaw's. The family cemetery certainly made a beautiful final resting place, one of the prettiest she'd ever seen.

She liked traveling with her men, especially when Buddy napped in the back seat, and she could cuddle next to Nathaniel.

Late that third night from Hico, amidst a chorus of little man puffy snores, the Ford Roadster rolled across the cattle guard and under the entrance gate sign Wallace Rusk had hung before going off to fight the Civil War.

So sad. He and Aunt Rebecca probably never imagined he'd never return to his home.

What would she ever do if anything ever happened to Nathaniel? She refused to even ponder on it.

She elbowed him. "Don't you think our family's owned the land long enough for it to be the Nightingale Ranch instead of everyone calling it the old Rusk Ranch?"

He shifted into second gear, laughing. "No, ma'am. Not until we sell out. Then it might be the old Nightingale place."

Only had to stop for two heavy springers that acted like they'd never seen an automobile before. Silly cows seemed to be debating whether to charge the contraption, but then ambled off.

At last, Nathaniel pulled the brake and killed the engine.

Shortly, a light shone, and a shotgun's double-barrel came out the front door. "Who goes there? Speak up before I give you what for."

"It's us, Ma. Put that scatter gun away."

"Nathaniel? Oh, my boy! Is it really you?"





Big hands lifted Buddy. He peeked with one eye but didn't wiggle. He liked it when the old man carried him to bed. He snuggled into the strong chest, loving its warmth and security, then sank back into his dream.

Loud-mouthed rooster! Buddy sat up. Was that chicken right outside his window? He looked around.

Where was he?

Slipping out of bed, he held his hands out into the still darkness, feeling his way. Where was the water closet? Had his old man stopped at another hotel? He bumped into something hard and moved around it to the right.

Finally, a wall. He scooted along it until a cold door knob came along. The thing opened, and a bit of light came from down the hall.

Was he at Gran's?

Soft stepping toward the kitchen, he sniffed big at the salty smell of bacon frying. Someone else awake had started cooking.

Yes, sir, he tiptoed on the right track. Loved hog cooked just about anyway, especially the cracklings. Well, he didn't like jowls much, but who did?

A voice stopped him cold as one of the floor boards creaked. His mama talking to another lady. Yep, Gran alright.

"Oh absolutely, sweet child. It thrilled me to get your letter. Broderick has gotten so big."

The only one who called him that—except when his mama got mad, then she used his whole name—Gran's declaration made him stand taller. He loved being five instead of four. A big boy.

Not a baby anymore. That's what Mama said.

"That he is! Five going on fifteen. Nathaniel lets him sit his lap and steer the car. Can you believe that?"

"Sounds so much like his daddy. Charley didn't use his head sometimes. You best talk him out of that business before someone gets killed or worse."

Mama laughed. "What could be worse, Ma?"

"Getting mangled, paralyzed, having to live out your days in terrible pain. You tell him to stop that. Never you mind, I will. What's that boy thinking?"

Easing a bit closer, Buddy grinned. His old man wouldn't let the woman folk boss him around. They could tell him to stop, but he'd still let him steer.

Why did the womenfolk think he couldn't drive? He was great at it. Stayed on the straight and narrow better than Mama. He sure loved it that Pa wouldn't let them treat him like a baby.

The woman hushed a bit. Buddy just about decided to burst around the corner when Gran whispered something. What had she

said?

"No, ma'am. We didn't discuss Jed last night."

"What do you think, Evelyn?"

"Uncle Charlie—well, Pa—I still have trouble not calling him Uncle. Anyway, he's been dead three years now. Nowhere is it written that you have to mourn him any given amount of time."

"He was the love of my life. I'll always miss him."

"Of course you will. But you don't have to live alone the rest of your life either."

"About did me in, him falling over dead right in the middle of a sentence. But praise God, he didn't suffer. And I wouldn't even be thinking about it if Harold Junior hadn't decided to stay in New York."

"Aww, we haven't heard that. We've been hoping he'd be here."

What? Why would they want Uncle Harold to stay there? Buddy didn't care for the man. Always acted like the boss of his little brother, and he said bad words when the ladies weren't around.

Plus he made fun of the old man being a preacher, too. Pa said he never hit a lick at a snake, and everyone knew snakes needed killing.

"I know, me, too, but . . . Anyway, I'd hate it if you and Nathaniel stayed away if we . . . were to get married."

"Why would we do that? Auntie—sorry, Ma—you have the right to be happy, and if Mister Briggs gives you some companionship and comfort in your old age, I say tell him yes! Get married!"

"Think so?"

"There isn't a reason in the world you both should live out your days being lonely when you could be together. By all means, marry the man! How does tomorrow sound?"

His granny laughed. "Sweet girl, you have never been without an opinion or shy, have you? Nathaniel loves you so much. It's easy to see how happy you make him."

"I know how blessed I am."

Oh, how Buddy loved it when the womenfolk were happy. Sure made things way nicer than when they got upset over something. Everybody thought so. The old man said it all the time, right from the pulpit, and all the men said loud amens.

They went back to the whispering, and he couldn't tell what either one of them said, so he strolled on into the kitchen. Both of them stopped talking and sat back like they hadn't been visiting at all.

Only looked right at him like he'd caught them red-handed.

"Buddy! You're awake so early."

"That dumb old rooster did it."

"You come right over here to your granny and give me a big old hug and some sugars, young man. I've been missing my Broderick

something terrible!”

As told, he hurried to hug her neck real tight.

“I love you, Gran.” He glanced over at his mother. “And I love you, too.” He wiggled to get the right spot in his grandmother’s lap. He loved how soft she was, like a big pillow.

“I’ve been missing you.”

“I missed you, too. So, what were you two whispering about? Who’s getting married tomorrow?”

His mama jumped up and scooped him into her arms. “Sleep good, Buddy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hungry for bressfesst?” He giggled at her saying it the way he did when he was only four. Made him feel all the bigger. He pronounced it with a kuh kuh sound in the middle since he turned five.

“I am! Yes, ma’am!”

She only wanted to change the talk, trying to make him forget the question. But she wouldn’t answer him anyway, and he knew better than to press. Mama didn’t like it when he wouldn’t let a really tired dog stay asleep.

Like getting grub was the most important thing right that minute, he grinned real big for her.

He’d ask the old man. His dear old dad would tell him.

While Gran scrambled his eggs just right, he visited the outhouse.

Swell having a little shack out back to take care of his business. But what would a body do when it turned off cold? Number one wouldn’t be too bad, but . . . He shivered and decided not to cross that creek.

Right then, he had bigger fish to cook . . . right after breakfast.



That night after a nice visit with Ma’s beau with too much cake and hand-whipped, sweet cream, Evelyn warmed her husband’s spot while he finished his evening devotional.

The man proved religious about only one thing, spending time on his knees and in God’s Word. Past that, he endeavored to let the Lord lead in all things.

Like always, he hung his pants and shirt on the backward chair next to the bed, slipped off his shoes, and placed them in the same spot he probably used as a boy, then scooted her over with a grin.

“You spoil me so, woman. Biggest thing I missed in France—not having a bedwarmer.”

Once he settled, she turned the oil lamp off. The cold sheets chased her to his side. "You're welcome, my love." For a bit she relished the moment then had to ask. "Was that disdain I detected for Mister Briggs this fine evening?"

"Perhaps."

"Gran was about to tell me the story when Buddy walked in on us this morning. All she got out was that they had a history. Do you know what that's all about?"

"That all she said?"

"Oh. Seemed somewhat concerned, maybe, that we wouldn't come visit if she married Jed. I asked why. After she looked around careful like, she leaned in, hushing her tones. Said she and Jed had a history that went way back. But then Buddy scampered in wanting to know what we were whispering about and who was getting married."

Her husband snorted. "So that's why he wanted to know."

"What?"

"Who was getting married. I figured Ma put him up to it."

"May have, but not on purpose. Forget about him a minute and tell me—tell me true now—do you know what she was talking about?"

He exhaled. "Afraid so, but you can't put it in the story, not in print. I'll not have my mother's sins exposed. It's under the blood, and that's where it needs to stay. It's forgotten and removed from her."

"What if she gives me permission? Would it be fine then?"

"No. Not ever. Pa wanted to kill Jedidiah Briggs."

"What kept him from it?"

"Didn't want to expose Ma. He loved her. No matter what else, he loved her."

"I promise it will stay between us, Nathaniel. And the Lord. So what happened?"

"Well, when Marah and Leland Charles—my half-brother—came that time, Ma took it pretty good, invited them in. Even fed them. Harold Junior and Leland are the same age, hit it off right away. 'Course, they didn't want me tagging along. Didn't matter none though, Not that day. I'd seen the looks getting passed around between Pa and Ma and Leland's mother."

"You were only Buddy's age then, right?"

"Maybe a year older. But eight or eighty, it was me and Pa working outside while Harold J helped Ma around the house. They all claimed I was a natural with the horses, but not so much, truth be known. I wanted to be with him, do whatever Pa was doing. Didn't matter how hard or dangerous. Worth the price, every bit."

"Exactly like you and your son?"

He chuckled but offered no confirmation, taking right up on his

story again.

“Anyway. They stayed that evening, left the next morning. Later that week, we all met up in town for the auction. Marah and Leland had brought a boxcar full of thoroughbreds from their fancy farm up in Connecticut.”

“Oh my. Please don’t tell me Uncle Charley wanted to buy one of her horses. He did, didn’t he? How’d your poor mother handle it?”

“Oh, she went with him of course. A brace of wild horses couldn’t have kept Ma away. But Pa hated the thought of not upgrading our herd, and she gave up on talking him out of it.”

“Sometimes wives have to do that to keep the peace.”

“Pa bought the best-looking colt in the bunch. To celebrate, of course, he had too much to drink.”

“That’s never good.”

“Ma caught him talking with Marah, and the lady had her hand on his shoulder. He swore later it was only to steady him. Anyway, Ma went into a rage then ran out.”

Evelyn waited, but he didn’t say more. “What happened then?”

“After Pa sobered up some, took H. J. and me home. Never did find out exactly what happened until years later, but after dropping us off, Pa tracked her to Jed’s house. Caught them in bed together. He told me all about it one night when we were both pretty lit up. Said he held his pistol to Jed’s head but couldn’t pull the trigger.”

“Oh mercy, Nathaniel! That would have been terrible!”

“He thought about shooting both of them, but he loved Ma too much. And us boys, too. So, he . . .”

His words trailed off, as though the rest could be understood without speaking the words. She elbowed him. “Did Uncle Charley do anything but talk with Marah that day?”

“Not then, but he did later. Pa guarded the truth. I figure all the others were—”

“Paybacks?”

“More like interest maybe. Then she’d get mad at him and slip off on over to Jed’s.”

“Oh, how awful. What did Jed’s wife think about that?”

“He never married. Far as I know, never turned sweet on anyone else. Only Ma.”

All those years.

Evelyn always thought Uncle Charlie was the whoremonger and drunk—that Auntie Lacey Rose was the saint. Well, either one could have jumped off the retaliation merry-go-round.

Turning the other cheek had never been easy for Evelyn either though.

“So no one ever knew about your mother and Mister Briggs?”

“Pa told the General that time we stayed with him during the spring roundup. Confessed later he was thinking about divorce, but your PawPaw talked him out of it.”

“Are you going to give your blessing?”



# Chapter Twenty-two

Midmorning of the next day, a growl pulled Buddy from his coloring. He jumped to his feet, flew out the side door, and ran the porch's length to the front corner then peeked around. Mister Jed pulled a big puppy with a rope tied around the dog's neck.

But the mutt had ahold of the line in his teeth, shaking it good and dragging his feet.

Buddy leaped off the porch and out to meet the visitor. "He don't like being pulled along, does he?"

Looking up, the man grinned. "Not much. Can't blame him really. I wouldn't want to have a rope around my neck either."

Buddy nodded. "Where'd you get him?"

"Bought him off a neighbor this morning." He's out of your grandpappy's Blue Dog bloodline. Thought you might like to have a hound to play with."

"Me?" He could hardly believe his ears. "You brought him for me?"

His knees hit the ground right there, but he stopped short and held his fist out like his father told him with a strange dog. Claimed it would be harder to bite a fist than an open hand.

"Hey, boy."

The mutt licked his knuckle then went straightaway to giving him a tongue bath, so he wrapped the critter up in his arms and threw his head back and to one side then the other to avoid all the sloppy licks.

"What's his name?"

"Hasn't got one. Guess you can call him whatever you want."

Buddy hugged his dog in close to his chest, looking him in the eye. "Who are you? How about Dubs?"

"Dubs?"

He looked up at Mister Jed. "Sure. Woodrow Wilson, he's the president. Two 'W's, so the old man calls him Dubs." He held the puppy's face in both hands. "Want to be Presidog Woodrow Wilson, Dubs? Dubs for short?"

Another lick caught him square on the kisser. He chuckled then untied the rope.

"Come on, boy! Let's race!" He jumped up and ran toward the barn. Dubs followed, bouncing and bounding right on his heels.





Through the kitchen window, Nathaniel witnessed the whole show and steamed. One more strike against old man Briggs. Who did he think he was, bringing his son a dog?

Mercy, Lord, my mother's sins have come home to roost.

Like she'd caught him thinking about her, Ma joined him at the sink. "What's Jed doing out there?"

"Old fool brought Buddy a pup."

"Awww, isn't that sweet? The boy could use a playmate, and I've been wanting me a good watch dog." She put her hands on the sink's edge and lifted herself up, leaning closer to the window. "Where is it? Is it a Blue Dog? Boy or girl?"

"How could I know?" Nathaniel scratched his unshaven jaw. "Last I saw, Buddy and the mutt went racing off to the barn."

She tapped on the glass then nodded toward the back door. Real quick, her hideaway man sauntered through the door. His mother slipped her hand into Briggs' then pulled on him. He bent a bit, and she kissed his cheek.

"You two need to talk. Evelyn and I'll be in the parlor when you're done."

Ambushed by his own mother. No wonder his wife wasn't anywhere in sight. Nothing but a conspiracy for sure and for certain.

Jed poured himself a cup of coffee then held the pot up.

"No thanks, I'm coffeed out." He slipped into his father's old chair at the head of the table—the one he'd never dream of sitting when his old man still lived, but for the time being, he sure wasn't about to let that man have it. Not yet.

"Buddy sure seemed pleased with the dog."

Nathaniel nodded but didn't mention how hard it'd be for the boy to leave the mutt behind next week. "Who's the sire?"

"Rooster, out of Big Boy."

Figured. His mother colluding to give his son a dog that traced back his own Blue Dog pup.

For the next few minutes, he let Briggs prattle on about what a great coon hound the animal ought to make. Not that he couldn't herd cows or run hogs if that's what Buddy wanted. Nathaniel filled his lungs then exhaled.

Best get to it. "You saved, Mister Briggs?"

"Yes, sir. Call me Jed, won't you?"

"Baptized?"

"I am, better than sixty years ago."

How could the man have been a Christian so long and carried on with his mother? Guess everyone had temptations. No one was perfect except Jesus. At least he wanted to make an honest woman of her.

For that, how could he not bless their union? Nathaniel rubbed his hand over his eyes. His mother deserved some happiness in her old age, and if . . .

“Did you know I asked Lacey Rose to marry me before your father ever did?”

He nodded. He’d heard that story. Knew all about her kissing him, and him giving her the twenty dollars gold that got her out of town. Still didn’t justify what he did. Or her either for that matter.

But their sins weren’t any worse than his own, and like his, all under the blood—forgiven and forgotten by God.

How could he do any less?

“Pa never regretted not killing you that time.”

“I know. We talked about it a few months afore he passed. Early on, we was friends. Glad to say we was at least on speaking terms at the end.”

“That’s good to know.”

“So what do you think, son? Lacey Rose says it all up to you. She couldn’t stand losing you and Buddy and Evelyn over me.”

“What about Harold Junior? Does he know?”

Jed nodded. “He and I are good. I’m not so sure he knows about his mother’s past with me though.”

“That why he went back to New York? Clear the way for you to move in?”

“Not that I know of.” The man looked him in the eye. “We were planning on living at my place.”

That’d make things easier. Briggs not sleeping in his father’s bed or eating at the table hewn by Pa’s own hands. He nodded.

“We’ll keep this place up for whenever you or H. J. come to visit. Or if you want, I’ve got plenty of room.”

Nathaniel closed his eyes then stuck out his hand. “You have my blessing.”



Briggs grabbed it and offered a good firm grip. “How about you marrying us? Sure would mean a lot to your mother.”



Pleased as punch.

That's how Evelyn would have described her mother-in-law if she'd been penning the story, but her dear husband swallowing his pride and prejudice against Jedidiah Briggs and officiating the ceremony swelled her own heart.

Aunt Lacey—Ma—had to be proud of her son.

It'd be hard to imagine one of her mother or father marrying someone else. In her mind, love joined Cecelia and Elijah Eversole at the hip, and even death didn't separate them. Losing both at the same time devastated Evelyn.

But truth was, she couldn't fathom them passing any other way. God used that earthquake as a blessing—to her parents.

A notion budded then blossomed in her last week at the Rusk Ranch. Once on the road again, heading back south with Buddy napping, she figured time to broach the subject might never be better.

First, though, she needed a bit of insight into her man's temperature. She scooted in close and patted his leg.

"How were you able to deny Buddy? I don't know if I could have done it. Especially not with him using his doe-eyes expression and his most polite and kind voice. He's such a little thespian."

"Self-preservation."

"Left up to me, Dubs would be curled up in the back seat next to his boy. How you did it is beyond me."

"Don't be silly. How could we travel with a spotted pup?"

Nathaniel laughed a rather wry chuckle. "I hate cleaning up after a dog, and I'm the one who'd inherit the job."

"I'd help."

"Umm-humm, if you say so. I'm pretty immune to his boyish charms, and besides, Ma wanting a guard dog wasn't completely a ruse."

"Well, my heart was about to melt. I almost said yes before you put your boot down."

"Good thing you didn't."

"Oh, is that so?" She scooted in even tighter. "So anyway, I've been thinking. I want a promise from you."

He glanced over then back to the road. "If it's in my ability, you know you can have your heart's desire. What is it?"

"Promise me that you'll remarry if anything ever happens to me."

He shook his head and put his arm around her, squeezing just right.

"No, ma'am. That's one promise I can't make. And seeing how I'm nine years older, I'll be dying first. So there it is—a moot point. What you do after I'm dead and gone . . . well, it's up to you. But don't be thinking I could ever get over you, my dear, not ever."

“Oh, Nathaniel.”

“It’s true. I’ve been in love with you way too long to even think about someone else. I adore you too much.”

“You’re so sweet.”

He chuckled again, that time held real mirth. “I love you more than life, sweet Evelyn, and will for all of eternity.”

Tears welled. “I love you, too, Mister Nightingale.” She pressed in even tighter, if that was possible. She’d loved him for the whole of her life.

Well, except for the six years she didn’t know him. And now that he made his livelihood preaching the Good News, her life seemed almost perfect. If only . . .

An image of a swaddled baby in the arms of a young lady who looked a lot like what she thought Milly May might if she’d lived, promenaded across her inner eye. The girl held the baby up, but before Evelyn could take the child, the daydream vanished.

A grandmother?

Was that what the Lord was showing her? Could it have been Buddy’s baby she saw?

But still . . .

“Remember now. We need to stop in Dallas to see if Auntie Sweetie Pie is back yet.”

“I haven’t forgotten. Want to tell me more of the story?”

“Not yet. Haven’t decided which way to go on the next chapter—whose eyes to see the scene or even exactly what.”

“You could jump ahead to the war. Might get three or four chapters out of my time in France.”

She nodded but didn’t respond—too deep into her storyline triggered by his proclamation of adoration. A chaplain who so loved his wife that when she died, he lost his faith.

Wow, lots of drama and emotion, all of the things any good story needed.

“You’re real quiet. What are you thinking? Will it work?”

“It’s an interesting proposition, but . . . you know how Jacob had Leah . . . and the two concubines?”

“What are you talking about? Where did that come from?”

“Oh, I’m thinking about a new story.”

“But you haven’t finished *Free*. Why are we thinking about another one?”

With a chuckle, she scooted over, turned in her seat, and faced him. “That’s how it works. MayMee said sometimes she had three or four plots fermenting. She’d trot one out every now and again to think on it until she needed a new story.”

“Jacob would have traded them all for more time with Rachel.

Laban tricked him into marrying Leah. The times and customs explain the two handmaids, but he only truly loved Rachel. Mourned her death the rest of his days.”

“It doesn’t say that, does it?”

“Trust me, he did. If not, why would he refuse to let Benjamin go with his brothers to Egypt? He thought the boy was all he had left of his beloved.”

She couldn’t argue with him when he was so right, but then he’d gone to Bible School and been ordained a minister of the Gospel. A giggle welled then escaped.

“What’s so funny?”

“You.”

“Me? I may have a superb sense of humor, darling, but I hadn’t said anything witty.”

“Oh, I’m only talking about you being this rough and tough cowboy who can subdue and gentle any bronc, no matter how wild or wooly—lost as a goose to boot—and now you’re this kind, compassionate, loving, longsuffering, gentle—need I go on?—Bible scholar.”

“Praise the Lord. His mercy endures forever. And I’m glad you think so, Wife.”

“Amen, and why wouldn’t I? You’re the most Christ-like man I know, Nathaniel Nightingale.” She leaned toward him and nuzzled his shoulder with her cheek. “Most of the time. I am not saying you’re perfect.”

Buddy’s head appeared from the rumble seat. “Hey! We got to stop. I need an outhouse. Can we have an outhouse some day?”



# Chapter Twenty-three

“What a story.” Nathaniel made a slight correction on Buddy’s steering, then glanced at his sweetheart. “Think your editor will be willing to include it?”

“Why not? They were the ones who wanted her experiences chronicled.”

“True, but . . .” Guess it didn’t matter, he’d use it like any other life incidents he knew of whenever the Lord moved on him. He loved relating personal happenings that fit with whatever point he wanted to make.

The Holy Ghost always brought them to mind at the right time.

Turning his attention back to the road, he focused on getting out of Dallas. The feat proved a bit tricky, what with so many farmers bringing their cotton and other crops to town.

One fine day, all wagons would hopefully be off the roads, though he might not live long enough to see it.

Mercy, so much had changed in his almost half-century on God’s green earth. If he lived so long, what might the next fifty bring?

That question and so many more got pondered along his trek south.

As always, he didn’t prepare his sermon but sought the Lord for a theme to expand upon. When in Bible School, he received high marks for his delivery, but not having notes almost got him drummed out of their preacher-boy class.

Praise God for Evelyn and her shorthand skills. But once he preached his sermon to her so she could write it out then type it for him, it lost some of its effect in class the next day.

“What are you grinning about?”

He glanced over then back at the road. An over-sized wagon load of hay was taking his half out of the middle.

“Just thinking about our days in Houston. You typing out my sermons, so I’d have something to turn in. Watch out, Buddy. Here, let’s go ahead and get off the road a little bit for that guy.”

“Those were fun days, except I hated you being gone so much.”

His son eased around the farmer like a pro. “Was Houston the war?”

“No, that was where I went to Bible School before you were born.”

“Oh, was I in Mama’s tummy then?”

“Not yet. The Bible says God knew us before he formed us in our mother’s womb, so during that time, you were in His mind, and He

already thought about you and knew you and loved you so much! Just look who he decided on to be your mother.”

“Yes, sir!” He gave her a quick smile. “And my old man, too. I like God a lot. He’s nifty keen.”

“That’s for sure.”

Nathaniel and his wheel-man maneuvered the Ford to Hico’s Nazarene Church grounds two full days before the preset start of the revival.

His wife appeared ecstatic to have the time to write the extra chapter her editor wanted for *Pearl of Great Price* and get it all typed up and in the mail.

At Bob’s urging, Nathaniel didn’t set up his tent. His friend claimed his building would handle the anticipated crowd, but they had people spilling out the doors that first night.

Next morning, the preacher and his deacon board cut his normal full day of unloading the canvas and raising it up square in half.

The open tent stood ready by dinner; its walls rolled up to catch whatever breeze might blow on the high-seventies, too-warm November day. They’d probably have to let them down after the sun went down.

Had to love the Texas weather.

Mid-afternoon of the second day, the urge to get on his face before the Lord almost overwhelmed Nathaniel. He’d seen William Seymour do it so many times at the Azusa Street Mission. He spent the time with his head stuck in the lectern on the little stage in his tent.

More than anything, Nathaniel desired the Lord’s manifest presence.

That night, he continued seeking the Lord while Evelyn—with Bob’s and Helen’s help—got the evening’s service started with some sweet praise and worship that ushered in His Holy Presence.

After seven songs, the Spirit lifted him to his feet, and he added his baritone to the congregation’s melody. He loved worshipping God, especially with new songs.

Then like the Lord had turned off the spigot, a hushed silence fell over the crowd.

Most of the attendees wore expressions of anticipation, faces lifted toward the sky, eyes closed, hands extended to Heaven.

A few seemed to be scoffers—or worse. Skepticism swam in one lady’s eyes. He met her stare. God’s love for the woman filled his heart. She carried some deep hurts.

“Please be seated.” He nodded. Yes, Lord. “People, I believe in the divine guidance and words of knowledge. Not that a body has to comply with the urging of the Spirit.”

A few nodded, but most wore blank expressions.

“Beyond any doubt, I was lost and bound for hell when my lovely wife there . . .” He nodded at Evelyn who beamed. Oh, how he loved the lady. How had he ever been blessed so? “She begged me to go with her and my parents to Bonnie Brae Street in Los Angeles. Any of you heard about the Azusa Street Revival?”

Most nodded or voiced affirmations.

“It started on Bonnie Brae, and praise God; we went the second night.” He chuckled at the remembrance. “My father, rest his soul, had been saved at an early age but wasn’t much of a Christ-like example when my brother and I were growing up.

“Anyway, he told me a couple of days later that this young lady with her arms lifted toward Heaven was telling him in perfect Comanche how the cow ate his cabbage.” He grinned. “Very few non-natives speak the People’s tongue fluently. Dad taught me a few words. He and my grandmother had been rescued when he was only four.

“So this young lady . . . Evidently, she thought she was praising God in the Spirit in an unknown tongue. In reality, though, through her words, God showed my father the way back to Jesus. He understood every word, and there was no denying it came from the Holy Ghost.”

A smattering of amens rippled through the tent. Hands shot up in praise, and a few jumped to their feet.

“Divine appointment for sure. All the way around. I accepted His gift of salvation and surrendered to His call to the ministry, to preach the Gospel. The young lady, my father, and certainly the hundreds of others there who showed up . . . All of us. Not that we had to be. We came by choice at the urging of the Spirit. Same as you are here this evening.”

“Last night, we prayed for several folks to be healed.” He shook his head. “I saw three dead soldiers come back to life long enough to receive salvation before two of them died again, the other got all the way home and lived.

“Now, I have no proof they were dead—not in this life.

“I tried my best to keep track of the soldiers who got saved, but . . .” He shrugged. “Had to be more than a thousand. Only God knows how many more of those doughboys were led to the Lord. Anyway, I said all that to say this.” He filled his lungs then exhaled slowly.

“There are scoffers here tonight. Others mad at God. Most of you good people are believers. That’s written all over your sweet faces. Now here’s what the Lord wants me to do.”

A chill washed over his soul. Could his trepidation be akin to what Peter and John experienced before they offered the lame man what they had instead of gold and silver?



“I want to invite all the skeptics and non-believers to come up front. The Lord is mighty to save, but He’s also mighty to heal. And tonight, folks, we’re going to see a little of what the first church saw.”

“Amen, Preacher!”

“Thank you, brother. Not because of me—or you. But because Father God is sovereign and can do whatever He wants whenever He wants.”

Another wave of amens swelled, rolled in like a wave, then faded.

“Tonight, Almighty God has said He wants to heal some folks.” He turned his palms over and motioned for the congregation to stand. “Prove to those here who aren’t so sure. Now last night, we prayed for a deaf man. Is he here tonight?”

A lady held her hand up.

“Can he hear, ma’am?”

“Not yet!”

“That’s the kind of faith I like to hear. Bring him on down, please, if you would. And folks, I’m serious. I want the scoffers and anyone else who doesn’t think the Lord still heals, to come on up front. See with your own eyes what the Lord is about to do.”

Three men and the lady he’d spotted earlier stepped out and made their way forward. All appeared ready to run him out of town on a rail—or worse.

“The blind lady. Are you here, dear?”

“Yes, Brother, I am.”

Pointing to the woman next to her, Nathaniel smiled. “Would you please help her down the aisle?”

“There’s someone here with a withered arm. If that’s you, please come on up. I saw a withered arm—your right arm—while I was praying.”

“It’s you, Johnny Ray! Stand up!” A frantic lady pushed on her son’s shoulder.

“Me? Is it me?” The boy of maybe fifteen raised his poor deformed arm for all to see, jumped up, then ran to the front.

“Past these three, I don’t know what the Lord has planned.” He pulled his little bottle of olive oil from his coat pocket and stepped off the platform. Upending the thing, he daubed a bit on each forehead, smiled, then looked skyward. “Father, thank you.”

He looked back. The young man grabbed his withered arm and unrolled the sleeve.

The scoffers inched closer.

The limb grew perhaps an inch then another.

His mother cried openly. “Roll your shoulder, Son.”

A few gasps sounded. Amens floated on the cool November breeze.

Then—like a seed sprouting—the arm stretched out whole, his crippled hand unfolded, and his fingers grew long and straight. It looked exactly like his left arm.

“I saw that!”

“It’s true! I’m healed! The Lord opened my eyes! I can see! I can see!” The lady turned a slow circle, wiping the tears from her face, obviously taking in all the sights! “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”

The majority of the congregation already stood.

The deaf man sank to his knees. He took to blessing God in a loud voice.

The tent erupted with cheers and hallelujahs! Weeping tears of joy followed.

Nathaniel held his hands up.

The roar quieted to a whisper then stopped altogether. He turned his attention to the jury of skeptics. “The Lord’s salvation is available to all. There’s none who cannot be saved. It’s a free gift.”

The men’s cheeks glistened, but the woman shook her head and marched out. Those in the aisle parted to let her pass.

“Brother Robert, would you come lead these men to the Lord.” His friend raced to comply.

“Anyone else who needs prayer, come forward now. Evelyn, if you have a song, sweetheart, now would be a good time.”

“Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling. He’s calling for you and for me.”



# Chapter Twenty-

## four

Evelyn loved church, especially her husband's services. He relied on the Spirit with nothing prepared that couldn't be discarded and changed.

Well, he followed the Scripture and entered His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise, but past that, he only wanted the same things she did—Father God's perfect will and His presence.

But it wasn't fair. All those people getting healed. It overjoyed her, of course, yet for her, proved so conflicting. It was wrong to covet. She had to believe and not doubt, continue to pray.

Then—praise the Lord—one fine day, her turn would come. The hardest part was the waiting.

The last night of Hico's revival, he threw her a spitball or curve—whichever pitch made a batter miss so badly. She liked playing baseball but wasn't as nearly up-to-date on all the game's terms, not like her man and his little man plant.

It often seemed those two had a lingo all their own.

For sure and for certain, he shocked her socks off inviting her up on the stage. He asked her to lead a song often, but always from the front row. A lady on the platform still offended many of the more traditional crowd.

But being asked to take the place at his side behind the pulpit usually only occupied by her husband certainly offered a whole new perspective.

With a grin plastered on her mug, she joined him.

What was he up to?

"The Word says in Revelation that Satan is defeated by the Blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimonies, loving not our own lives, even unto to death." He smiled at his congregation, then her. "Before we came to Hico, we were blessed with a nice visit with a wonderful lady."

Where could he be going?

Leaning in close, he took her hand. "Tell them about Auntie Sweetie Pie and her father."

What? He expected her to talk?

In front of them all?

With a finger curled, she poked his palm with her longest nail. She'd get him later. He stepped to the side and offered his biggest grin, then held his other hand out toward her, turning her, assuring

her with his eyes everything would be fine.

Staring at him for a bit, she finally faced the crowd.

It definitely was a great story of forgiveness, and he had been up front all that week. For the first few minutes, she relayed Pearl's story and how it had come about she was writing it.

Surprised that any jitters calmed right down, she related that her editors requested a follow-up—a conclusion to Poppy and Carter Hightower's story.

"After the jury convicted Mister Hightower, but before he went to prison, her mother decided the girl needed to meet her father. Pretty figured her daughter might not have another opportunity.

"Miss Poppy said that first time, she only hid behind her mama's skirts and peeked at the man everyone called a monster—the man they told here was her real daddy."

Evelyn filled her lungs then exhaled slowly. She liked being up there by his side. Maybe Nathaniel would let her start leading praise and worship from the platform.

"Years went by, but Poppy never forgot her father. She wrote him letters, then when she turned sixteen—the age she could visit him without her mother who refused to go to Huntsville, she went to see him again.

"Can you blame Miss Pretty? The man who took her innocence at an age when she should have still been playing with dolls? Then to make things worse, beat her regularly? So bad sometimes, she spent days in bed."

Evelyn shook her head, overcome again that such cruelty could be in a man's heart.

"Poppy knew it all, the whole story. She'd seen the scars many times, rubbed oil and lotion on them of a night to ease her mother's aching."

A tear escaped and trickled down her cheek.

"If you're like me, you've got to be wondering why. The reason the young lady would do such a thing . . ."

She closed her eyes and swiped at the tear.

"Yes, you guessed it. She'd gotten saved and hated the thought of her father spending all of eternity roasting in hell. She forgave him first. Had to be by the grace and mercy of the good Lord."

Murmurs followed gasps across the congregants.

"It took twelve visits for her get through to the old slave master, but she finally did.", and he gave his heart to the Lord. Got baptized right there in the prison yard in a watering trough."

Amens sounded from around the tent. Hands lifted toward Heaven.

"The best part is all the folks Poppy's been blessed to lead to the

Lord telling her story.”

Evelyn wiped both her cheeks with one hand.

“Whenever the Lord led, Poppy would share what a sorry rotten man her father had been then about all the grief her mother gave her for visiting him.”

A lady on the third row stood up. “The girl’s mother shouldn’t have made it any harder on the poor child.” Her face turned a bright red, and she sat back down.

Though Evelyn smiled on the inside at the great compliment to her storytelling, she did her best to keep the amusement off her face. Where had she left off? Oh, yes.

“I know, I know, but poor Miss Pretty . . . Anyway, then Poppy would rejoice over that most wondrous day when the evil Carter Hightower confessed his sins and received Jesus.”

A ripple of hallelujahs and praise filled the Lord’s tent.

Her husband stepped back beside her. “Folks, we’ve had a glorious week being with you. Now, if everyone will take their seats, I’d like to open the service up to anyone who wants to share their testimony.

“Remember, we will overcome. Don’t be shy now. Come on up front.”

Several stood and made their way up the aisle.

“And if anyone needs prayer or healing, Brother Robert and I will be here however long it takes, so there’s no need to feel rushed, folks. Tell your story.” He laughed. “Drag it out if that’s how the Holy Ghost leads. Share what’s on your heart. This is one of the ways we defeat the devil.”

Evelyn slipped her hand into Nathaniel’s. So that was his plan all along. He wanted her to break the ice.

Maybe she would take pity on the poor man.

If only he would do his duty and give her another baby girl.



Next morning, Buddy couldn’t remember falling asleep or how he got into his lofty bed above the trailer’s divan, but he did remember hearing all the stories. He loved them, especially that lady who had been blind.

While she talked, his feet got so happy to hear about her seeing again, he took to dancing! She joined him and held his hands, and he went around and around with her.

Almost all of the folks joined in. He loved church and wished

Dubs could be there. It hurt his heart that his dog had to stay at Gran's. He could live in the trailer with him and his parents.

There was plenty of room.

Plus he'd love getting petted by so many people.

Slipping out of bed, Buddy tiptoed to his parents' room. Easing the curtain back, the two big lumps testified to them being sleepyheads. That's what they were.

He marched back to the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets until he found the graham crackers. He'd rather have bacon and eggs and toast, but he didn't know how to fix a real breakfast.

With all his bites and crunching, the whole first big line disappeared.

Half a box of sweet goodness later, he could barely swallow. He needed a tall glass of milk, or even better, a Coca-Cola.

Hey!

That spare nickel his old man had given him hid out in his pocket in yesterday's britches. He hadn't fed it into the slot in his piggy bank yet.

Quickly, he dressed—except he didn't get the bows tied right, but it didn't make any difference. He stuffed the extra laces down into the sides of his shoes, and they worked fine.

Careful not to be loud, he opened the door to a bright shiny day. Cold though, so he went back inside and searched until he found his jacket, then slipped out.

A truck rumbled by, but it was going the wrong way.

If he remembered right, the store was up the street a little ways, not too far. Sure enough, exactly where he thought, a grease monkey worked on a car behind the little building.

Another guy pumped gasoline into the tall glass while the customer leaned against the Ford's fender smoking a cigarette.

Buddy hated those nasty-smelling things. He strolled into the store, careful not to let the screen door slam. His old man hated that noise.

Whistled him back from wherever he'd run every time to make him close it again without slamming it—after it was already closed. He hated that. The store owner might not sell him a Coke if he was anything like his father.

He put his nickel on the counter. "Coca-Cola, please."

The guy took the money then nodded toward a box next to the front door. "Help yourself, sonny boy."

Buddy didn't much like being called sonny, but what did it matter? He lifted the box's lid. Right there inside, his bestest favorite pop of all filled one of the lines. He loved grape soda even better than Coke. "Is the grape more money?"

“Nope, all a nickel.”

Guiding the front one around the line’s corner, he pulled it out then pried the cap off with the opener on the side of the box. He took a nice long swig right then and there. “Man, I love grape. It’s the bees’ knees.”

The man grinned. “They are good.”

Nodding, he threw the man a salute just like he’d seen the soldiers do, then strolled out. A guy he hadn’t noticed before stood outside looking rather sad.

“Hey, son, you seen a little dog?” The man bent over and held his hand off the ground. “About this tall. My wife is worried sick about him.”

“No, sir.”

“Where do you live? Ain’t seen you around.”

“Don’t live here.” He nodded toward the church. “We came for the meeting.”

“Oh. So is that where you walked from just now? I saw you come up. So, your parents are with you?”

“Yes, sir.” He guzzled a swig of pop. “They’re still asleep.”

“Well then, could you help me look for my dog? I can pay you. Whether we find him or not. What do you say?”

Buddy took another swig. “How much?”

The man put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a dime. “Will this be enough? Shouldn’t take too long. The little rascal couldn’t have gone very far.”

That’d be enough dough for another grape soda with a moon pie to boot. “Sure, let’s go.”

The man stuck out his hand, but before Buddy took it, a voice he remembered from somewhere pulled him around.

“Buddy, you best get on back now. Your mama will be worried when she wakes ups and finds you gone.”

“Hey. I remember you. You’re that nice old man who told me to ask the little cripple girl to come color—the one with the Radio Flyer. I got one now! Did you know she got healed that night?”

The fellow had such kind eyes. Buddy liked him. He glanced back at the one who’d lost his wife’s mutt. That guy didn’t seem too happy anymore.

“He’s right, mister. Mama wouldn’t like it. I better get back before she wakes up. But I’ll holler if I see your dog.”

That mean one glared at him then at the nice one. He grabbed Buddy’s arm, but the old man was suddenly right beside him.

The guy let go, backed up a step, then took off running like in a race or something.

Buddy watched him go then turned around, but no one was there.



Where had his friend gone?

He wanted to save the last drink for when he got back, but it tasted so good, and the bottle was getting heavy to carry, so he chugged the last swig and sat the bottle next to a tree where a kid could find it and get the penny for turning it back in.

Once home, his parents were still sleeping, so he climbed onto their bed. "Hey, Mama, guess what?"

"Buddy, it's way too early to be playing guessing games. Just tell me, sugar."

"I saw my friend from when God fixed that wagon girl's legs so she could walk again. You remember?"

Opening one eye, she rolled her head up from the pillow. "What friend?"

"You know, that nice man who told me the wagon girl would like to color. I shared with her. 'Member him now? The nice old guy."

She sat up. "When did you see him?"

"A little bit ago."

"Where, Buddy?"

"At the store."

"You were at the store? When?"

"I just told you, a little bit ago."

"This morning?"

"Yes, ma'am. This other guy wanted me to help him look for his dog. It got lost. But my friend showed up. He said you wouldn't like it if I wasn't here when you woke up."

"He was right!"

"So I told the dog man I better come on home, and he got mad and grabbed my arm. But my friend got there right by me real fast, like quick as a squirrel climbs a tree."

"He grabbed you?" She shook the old man's shoulder. "Nathaniel, wake up. Someone grabbed Buddy."

His father sat up and looked at him then stretched. "What are you talking about? He's right there."

"Anyway, the dog man ran off like my friend scared him, then they was both gone."

"What dog man?"

"Why were you at the store, Broderick Eversole Nightingale? How'd you get there?"

Uh oh, his mother never used his whole name unless she got mad, but why would she be? He didn't do anything.

"What store?" His father lay back down, but with his head propped up on his hand.

Mama turned to him. "Would you pay attention? Buddy says a man with a lost dog grabbed him at the store."

“I came back. What are you mad about? I only went and got me a grape soda with my nickel. Those graham crackers made me thirsty. It was great.”

He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue.

“Is my licker purple?”



# Chapter Twenty-five

During her last two days in Hico, Evelyn didn't let Buddy out of sight, scrutinizing any and all who came within arm's reach. How could she have come so close to losing him? Praise God for his guardian angel!

Once the good folks had struck the tent then packed it and all the other equipment in the truck, she handed her boy over to his father and put the little town in her rearview mirror.

All the way north to Denison for the next meeting, she hashed and rehashed the plot she'd hatched. He'd have to agree. But what would she do if he didn't?

That he'd seemed so unconcerned some weirdo tried to grab her baby boy angered her, but she was convinced it had been a warning.

The devil hated Nathaniel and would do anything to stop him from preaching the Good News. He needed to be aware and be careful. Instead, the stubborn donkey chided her for worrying.

Wasn't there a difference between worry and concern or . . . using the brain God gave him?

The meeting in Denison didn't have any miraculous healings, but twice as many souls accepted the Lord's salvation, and the collection hat overflowed. God did work in mysterious ways.

Scripture said it, and she'd experienced it. More than once in her lifetime. She could testify.

A body would have thought it would have been the other way around. Seeing the blind and deaf healed or the restoration of a boy's withered arm would surely draw all men to Jesus.

Shouldn't a miracle or two cause more folks to believe and empty their pockets in support of the Lord's work?

On the other foot, her beloved could preach. Mercy, she loved the sound of his voice, the way he told a story, then brought home the point, propelling the lost down the aisle to the front and eternal salvation.

The last night after tucking Buddy in and reading him to sleep, she broached the subject, praying she'd polished it to the point of him not having any counterpoint. She'd win the debate.

Then her wonderful plan would come to fruition without a harsh word being spoken.

She snuggled into her place on his arm. "Great meeting, Husband."

"Thank you, Wife. Have you written down those two new songs the Lord gave you tonight?"

"Not yet, but they're in my head. I've got them."

"Good. I loved that 'I Will Trust In You' one."

"I've been thinking."

"Uh oh." He laughed. "What have I done now?"

"Nothing." She pinched him playfully. "Why would you say that? I was only going to ask what you thought about wintering in Clarksville instead of going to Oklahoma City. How about that?"

"Why? I thought we settled on going to visit the Parkers. There's got to be plenty of places to set up the tent if they don't have room."

Rolling over, she sat up in bed, lit the oil lamp, and smiled.

"Nathaniel Nightingale, that man trying to grab Buddy got me to thinking. He needs his Dubs pup."

He made his poor-me face. "No, Evelyn. Having that dog with us would cause all kinds of problems."

"You don't know that. He won't if he's a good dog." She waved her pointer finger in staccato. "First. Can you imagine my Queenie or your Big Boy letting anyone harm either of us when we were Buddy's age?"

"Dubs isn't either. He's—"

"What? You can't even know! That isn't fair. We haven't spent near enough time around that pup to really know any such thing. But. If we were to spend the winter in the Rusk house, we could see if he really is a Blue Dog or not."

"Evelyn."

"Plus, it would give me time to work on *Free*. I'm running out of days, you know."

"I thought you were getting close."

"I am, but still. I, for one, would hate having to give half our advance back, and I haven't spent any time at all writing. I've been too busy keeping an eye on our son."

"Sweetheart, I spanked him good. He'll not be going to the store or anywhere else without permission from one of us. Stop your worrying! The Lord is watching over him. He's protecting us all."

"I know He is. But . . . I can't stand losing another child. It would kill me for sure . . . and it'd just be nice to spend some time at home and feel safe."

Tears welled of their own design. She promised herself she'd not turn on the waterworks, but the thought of going on without the dog about gave her apoplexy.

"Evelyn."

"What, Nathaniel?" She hated the way that came out. If a stranger heard it, he'd definitely think she didn't love the ox with her whole heart. He could be so pigheaded sometimes though.

"You really think we need to bring that dog with us?"

"I do. At least we can give the idea a chance. We don't have to say a word to Buddy until we get to know Dubs better, but if this is the Lord leading me . . . that pup will be every bit as smart as his great-great—did we ever figure out how many greats it would be?"

"I don't think so."

"Anyway, I believe he'll be a chip off his however-many-greats-grandpap." She nodded, swallowing back the sob that had climbed halfway up her throat.

"Could be. Are you saying God planted this idea?"

"Not exactly, but I have been praying about it. Helen gave me her list. I could write them all and set up our meetings for the spring. But by then, we'd know if the pup was house broke or not.

"Queenie wouldn't dream of going inside, and Dubs is what? Her great-great-great-grandnephew?"

"You and your greats." He shook his head then snorted his capitulation. "I guess we could add a room and a water-closet to the house."

She liked that idea. "How about two? That'd be great." She reached over and tickled his side. "We could have one in our room for privacy, then one for everyone else."

"Do we have enough money for that and laying up for six months?"

If only he knew how much they had, he'd probably want to give it all away. "I think so, but there's nothing to say you won't have some offers to preach around Red River County. Then once I finish *Free*, what's to stop me from knocking out a Ranger book or two?"

"I thought you were sick of writing children books."

"Never. Why would you think that? I wrote every one for Buddy, and he loves them. He just wears me out wanting to hear them over and over." She shrugged. "Having a home is a powerful motivator."

"Let's call it a home base. I couldn't stand not preaching the Gospel."

"I know." She took her favorite place on his arm again and traced a circle on his chest. With going to Clarksville settled, she still had the one other matter. She turned the lamp's wick down then out.



The third day back in his parents' home, Nathaniel decided she'd been right and that God had indeed been the instigator. Having somewhere to winter was great, gave him time to study and show himself approved. He hated preaching the same message.

Worst, though, ministering in his own flesh.

Who knew?

Perhaps the Lord would open the door for him to lead some of his old running buds to salvation.

Evelyn strolled into the parlor holding a fifth. "What, pray tell, is this doing in my closet?"

He snickered. "That, my love, is about the best-sipping whiskey this side of Heaven."

"Nathaniel!"

Her look of disgust about sent him into a laughing fit, but he held it in. Wouldn't do to get her too riled up.

"It was Pa's. Knowing it was in the top of his closet brought some comfort whenever the taste hit him too bad, but him never cracking the cork after Bonnie Brae brought Ma even more comfort."

"I don't understand."

"You wouldn't. You're not a drunk. Put it back where it was."

"Why?"

"Figure I'd give it to Buddy when he turns twenty-one."

"Why would you do that?"

"I'll tell him about his grandfather and me—to some extent—and tell him it'd be best to keep the cork in the bottle. But if he has to know what whiskey tastes like, better to drink the good stuff."

She glared at him for too many swallows then shrugged and marched back toward the bedroom, holding the bottle out as if a rattlesnake.

Would his parents' old room ever seem like his?

Maybe he should have had the carpenters double the size of the new room and make it his own, but then he'd have to convince her, and that really wasn't worth the breath.

By the second month, after all the banging stopped and Evelyn got all of his parents' old furniture either in the new room or up in the attic, it had become his room.

Except she claimed it, too.



Good. The stack of pages had dwindled. Evelyn eased on into the parlor and took the wingback across from him. He glanced at her, lowered his gaze to the pages in her hand, then went back to his reading.

The overwhelming desire to bolt almost set her feet to running, but the scene needed to be included in the book.

Better for him to read it then though.

Heaven forbid he should hear about it from someone else. She should have told him years ago, but . . .

She studied his face while he read. Such a handsome man. Praise the Lord, he'd never been like his father as far as the ladies were concerned. Most of the time, he seemed to have no idea how attracted to him so many women were.

How many times had she intercepted some hussy who only wanted him—not his prayers?

He looked up. "What are you grinning about?"

Her lips spread. No need to take him where she'd been. "So? What did you think?"

"Excellent, as always, honey. Bless God, I'll never have to go to war again."

"Amen! Did you mark it up much?"

"Not really. Got too caught up in it. A couple of times, I thought I smelled gunpowder."

She loved it. "So you think the scene depicts what you went through close enough? It was believable?"

"Yes, ma'am, plenty good enough. Better than good."

"Well . . . There's one more scene I want you to read here. But before that, tell me, what do you think of the ending?"

"Good, satisfying." He set the pages aside and motioned her to his lap. "But it was only the beginning."

"True." She sat down and cuddled into his chest. "Still though, I had to end it somewhere. The little wagon girl getting healed seemed as good a place as any. Giving God glory."

"So if it's done . . ." He took hold of the extra pages in her hand, but she tightened her grip instead of letting go. "What have you got here?"

For a heartbeat, she didn't answer. Would it hurt him? It needed to be in the book.

"Oh, they go in somewhere long before the end. I'm thinking maybe back in the earthquake chapter. Along in there." Her fingers refused to loosen their grip.

"Well? Let go."

She let him take the pages then stood. "Come find me when you're done."





The look in her eyes stumped Nathaniel. He'd never seen that particular reaction before and studied it in his mind's eye.

Looking at the new first page, he glanced back up in time to catch a glimpse of her as she walked out of the room then returned his attention to the scene she wanted him to read.

Evelyn filled her lungs, exhaled slowly, then tapped on her parents' bedroom door. No response. Nothing. Had she waited too long? It wasn't that late. She tapped a bit louder.

"Evie? Baby, that you?"

"Yes, Daddy." Would he ever call her by the name they gave her? She loved Evelyn, especially the way Nathaniel said it.

The door opened, and her mother's face appeared. "Something wrong, dear?"

"No, Mama. Nothing's wrong, but . . . it's just . . . there's something we, uh . . . need to talk about."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

Please no. She couldn't put it off another day. Her courage wavered. Her confidence drooped, but she shook her head. "No, Mama. I really want to discuss this now. It's important."

Her mother backed up, opening the door. "Then come on in."

Dressed in his robe, her father sat in his reading chair looking rather dapper, the perfect complement to Mama's very stylish lounge attire. She sat her wingback next to him, so Evelyn leaned against the edge of the bed.

Figured it'd be better to stay on her feet; didn't want to sit down.

How many times had she been in the exact spot with them right where they sat? After that night though, would they even let her back in the house?

"I needed to talk tonight because Nathaniel's train arrives at noon tomorrow."

Her father nodded. "I saw the telegram. Charley with him?"

"No, sir. Not this time." Her insides twisted into knots. How could she put it? She'd practiced, but . . . "Daddy, Mama, he's coming for me. You see, we're getting married."

Her mother started to say something, but Evelyn raised her palm toward her.

"I know, Mama. I understand we won't have your blessing."

"That's a fact. Wouldn't any gentleman interested in doing the right thing be coming to me to ask for your hand?"

"We know what you'd say, Daddy. We figured we'd have to elope, and—"

"What?" Her mother jumped up. "What did you just say, young lady?"

"That . . . if you and Daddy couldn't see fit to give us your blessings, we'd elope. One way or another, we are getting married."

"You can't. I won't allow it." She looked to him. "We won't. Tell her, Elijah."

"Mother, I'm seventeen, of legal age. The same as you I might say when you married Daddy. I don't need your permission. Now, I do hope to have your blessing. If you want me to have a big wedding . . ."

Her father straightened in his chair, and her mother stood.

"Or a little one . . . we can wait a week for you and me to put something together, but no longer."

"A week? No longer? Are you issuing us an ultimatum?"

"That's not the word I'd use, Mother." She searched her Daddy's eyes for any shred of hope. "It's just . . . Nathaniel and I are not waiting. We won't postpone it that long if you can't give us your blessing."

"Evelyn May." Her father shook his head. "Nathaniel is not a believer. You cannot marry a heathen. It's against Scripture. You'll regret it."

"I'll never regret marrying him."

"His father . . . Let's just say your Uncle Charley hasn't been the best of . . . Sons are likely to follow in their father's footsteps. Best ask your Aunt Lacey Rose what's it's like to be yoked to a drunk."

"And a womanizer." Her mother's eyes spit fire.

"That isn't fair!" She hated them both sometimes. Maybe not ever as much as she loved them, but they could be so . . .

"Nathaniel doesn't drink anymore! He hasn't touched hard liquor in years! Not since I caught him when I was only six—at PawPaw's when he passed."

"He had liquor around you when you were six?"

"No, Mother. It wasn't like that. I caught him in the barn taking a nip."

"So there. You know what we're saying is true."

They'd never understand. She turned on her father.

"And he hates how his father is! Nathaniel is not Uncle Charley, Daddy! He's a good man with a good heart, and he loves me. And I love him! I've loved him all my life."

Her mother held her hands up, glanced heavenward, then lowered her glare as though she'd received some revelation. "Your grandfather will roll over in his grave if you marry someone who's not a Christian."

"That isn't going to work."

"You really want to have to explain yourself to your PawPaw when you go to Heaven without a husband?"

"He loved Nathaniel, and he loved me. He'd want us to be happy."

"But he's so much older than you. No telling how many young ladies he's—"

"Daddy! Only one more year than you're older than Mama!"

Her cheeks warmed. Why couldn't they see how ridiculous all their objections were?

"And other women? That's just a lie. You don't know! We've been in love for years now! He's not so much as even kissed another woman."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is! He's promised me he wouldn't, and he swears he hasn't. My Nathaniel is not a liar. He's a guardian of the truth."

"Have you considered that Charley and Lacey Rose don't have any money? None to speak off, and if you insist on doing this in rebellion, we'll be forced to cut you off. Tell her, Elijah. Don't let her do this."

"Money? You think I care about filthy lucre? I don't want any of your money! We'll be fine! Nathaniel makes plenty buying, training, then selling horses. And he's already built us a cabin."

"In Texas? So you're planning on moving halfway across the country to live in Red River County?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her father shot her a smirk. "You've never been there in the summer. It gets so hot, you can't sleep at night. And the bugs will eat you up."

"Oh they will not."

He chuckled. "Texas mosquitoes are so big, they'll carry you off. And there's ticks and chiggers and fleas so bad . . . Daughter, you've led a sheltered life. We love you."

"I love you, too, Daddy. That's why we thought it was so important to at least ask you to bless our union."

"Sweetheart, Nathaniel Nightingale is . . ." He shrugged. "He's a nice enough person, but rougher than a cob. Evelyn. Think about what you're doing."

"I have, a lot." Her face burned hot. "This is not some flippant decision! I've been thinking about marrying him for eleven years now. We're getting married. Period. That much is settled."

"You'll regret it."

"No, ma'am." She refused to even look her in the eye. "I, for sure and for certain, will not. I love him, and he loves me, and that's all that matters. I'll never regret being his wife."

Nathaniel looked up from the last page. His wife stood under the archway, staring at him with a pensive expression.

She took a step closer. "Say something."

"What's to say? They were telling the truth. How would you react if Buddy wanted to marry a non-believer?"

"That's different. If he's been in love with some young lady for all his life, and they want to get married, I'm not saying a word against it."

“What if she was a devout Hindu or Buddhist or heaven forbid, a Campbellite.”

She pursed her lips and gave him the same little girl smirk she’d used to end every argument he’d ever had with her. “Not going to happen. I’ve been praying too hard for my baby boy.” She inched closer. “So. You’re not mad at them?”

“No. Might have been back then, but . . . I figured something like that happened. We were prepared to elope.”

“True. But we did have a grand wedding, considering Mama and I only had a month’s preparation.”

“Longest four weeks of my life. Sitting around waiting for the girl of my dreams.” He stood and held out his arms. “Come here. Where’s Buddy?”

She walked into his embrace. “He and Dubs are out back.”

“How far out back?” He nuzzled her ear then kissed her neck.

She scrunched but didn’t shy away. “Not far enough.”

“Oh. What a shame.”

By April of that year, it wasn’t even up for debate whether the spotted dog would get to go to the meetings. Nathaniel wasn’t sure about Queenie—or even Blue Dog himself—but that Dubs . . . he was something else!

Better than his own mutt by a mile.

Pity the poor idiot who ever made the mistake of trying to hurt Buddy.

Or any of them for that matter.



# Chapter Twenty-six

Evelyn set the turkey on the table, slipped in next to Nathaniel, then took his hand and Buddy's.

"Father, thank You for your bountiful blessings." He squeezed her hand as always when mentioning blessings in his prayers, letting her know he counted her one. "What an awesome year this has been. So many miracles, salvations, money raised for the poor, and all our needs met with Your abundance.

"And now, our wonderful family all here together for this special day of giving thanks. Bless us and this awesome meal we are about to share. Amen."

Evelyn loved it.

If only the Lord would see fit to give her a daughter, but praise Him! She had so much to be thankful for. The bowl of mashed potatoes came around, and she turned her attention to filling her plate.

Not much conversation ensued for a while, then her not-so-new father-in-law washed down his last bite and leaned back in his chair. "What was the final count, Son? How many souls did you and Evelyn lead to the Lord this year?"

Her husband looked to her.

"Three hundred fifty-nine, plus so many rededications, I lost track."

"Bless the Lord! That's wonderful news." He grinned. "Can you believe it's almost a new year?"

"It's true. Time does fly by."

"How many meetings have you planned for next year?"

Nathaniel set his fork down. "We're going to do things a bit different next year. We've only booked eight meetings where we're taking the tent. All of those during the summer.

The rest of the time, it'll only be Friday and Saturday nights with one service on Sunday—if it's in driving distance."

Buddy jumped to his feet. "I'm going to school! Ain't it grand?"

"Yes, it sure is, young man."

"On account I just turned six!"

The old man winked at his wife's only grandson then looked to Evelyn. "What brought this on? Thought you'd been teaching him."

"Yes, sir, that's correct, But we discussed it and decided he needs to be in a classroom for a while. With some playmates."

"Who wants pie? Anyone ready?" Her mother-in-law stood.

"Me and my old man are always ready for pie. Got any really cold

cream, Gran?"



The days from Thanksgiving to New Years took forever and counting them all until school started took about two years. Maybe longer.

Buddy could hardly wait. He tried to be patient. Mama kept telling him that was a virtue. But oh man, he was waiting as fast as he could.

When the day finally came, it pleased him to no end that he got to sit with the bigger kids because he already knew way more about reading and writing and arithmetic than the little snout noses his age.

His mother seemed pretty pleased, too. She kept gushing over how smart he'd always been and how he was such a quick learner.

Shame about the teacher. He'd call the older woman downright hard to look at; nothing near as beautiful as his mama. He'd seen only a few ladies who were close to as pretty, but so far, she was the prettiest and kindest and smartest lady he knew. Even though Miss Nabors hurt his eyes, she seemed nice enough.

He loved being in school!

The cat's meow on top of the bees' knees!

Every morning on his way to class, he had to leave Dubs at Gran's on account of dogs wasn't allowed. Though a shame he had to stay, the best hound ever obeyed when Buddy told him he had to keep Gran company.

Then every afternoon—somehow he knew when the time came—and showed up to get him at the schoolhouse.

Then he and his best ever friend ran home together.

Most days, Buddy stopped at Gran's on the way on account of she always had plenty of cookies and never made him quit at only two.

Plus, she milked Bessie every day and kept it real cold in her icebox. He liked the iceman and his old flopped-eared mules and loved how his big frozen blocks got Gran's milk so cold.

Came at his old man from every direction about buying a milk cow, even offered to milk her himself, but his father always said they traveled too much and there was no way and no. Said he'd had enough early milking to do him up Jake.

He had no desire to ever milk again.

Buddy didn't know any Jakes.

When he and Dubs would get home, Mama always counted and

only let him have two cookies with a glass of water. She didn't know about him getting five or six at Gran's, and he hoped hard they two never got to talking about cookies.

But after all, he needed plenty to grow on!



Unlike her son, for Evelyn, that year and the next one whizzed by. Then Mister Briggs took sick with a bad hacking cough. The old dear lasted until the first blue norther.

At the funeral, Doc Hughes revealed Jedidiah had been battling lung cancer for a while, but didn't want anyone to know.

Poor Aunt Lacey . . . two husbands died on her. Evelyn couldn't imagine and didn't even want to try.

Over her mother-in-law's protest, Nathaniel insisted she take back her old room. Though she disagreed with her husband, what could she say?

The house belonged to his mother, and the guest room wasn't all that much smaller.

When the first weekend meeting after the new widow moved in rolled around, it surprised Evelyn when Buddy told Dubs to stay with his grandmother. Of course, it made perfect sense.

Graciously, the dear lady claimed she'd be fine all alone, but her grandson insisted until she relented.

Once the dust settled after all the changes thrown at her little family, time took to galloping along. Evelyn loved her life again. The weekend meetings only got better and better. But that summer's campaigns?

They proved beyond awesome yet so exhausting at the same time. Daddy had been right about one thing. Texas summers were brutal. She'd never get used to them.

Just when she thought she couldn't stand much more heat, praise God, the nights cooled.

School started back, bringing a sweet peace in the home. She settled into quiet mornings with the Lord, lunch with Nathaniel and his mother, then writing in the afternoons.

Before long, leaves turned to their beautiful autumn colors and performed their final dances of praise falling to the ground. She prayed and prayed, but had almost given up on a baby girl. Buddy would soon be ten years old.

Then to her wonder, her monthly time passed, and her faith grew.

For six or seven weeks, she practically held her breath. She had to be sure though. Happiness almost exploded from her every day that passed with no signs. And other signs followed, too.

It thrilled her the first time she lost her breakfast, but she blamed a stomach bug. Nathaniel bought it hook, line, and sinker.

The time came when if she didn't share her good news with him, she'd certainly bust, so she decided to let her husband in on her wonderful secret.

As always when a bit of nip tickled the breeze, she warmed his side while he finished his studying. Instead of scooting over when he trimmed the lamp, she stayed put.

Sidling up to the bed, he grinned. "You going to roll over? Or did you want me to count your ribs?"

"Can if you want, but . . ." She returned his smile. "I figured you might want to know what you have done."

"Me? What are you talking about? I haven't done anything."

"Oh, yes. You definitely have." She stifled the chuckle halfway across her tongue and steeled her face straight.

Too late, though. He'd caught her mirth, and his lips practically split his cheeks. "So . . . do I need to . . . ask forgiveness?"

She shook her head. "No, sir. Not at all."

"So it's a good thing I did then?"

"Absolutely, my dearest." She scooted over and held the sheet up. "I'm pregnant."

"Really? For sure? You're not joshing?"

"For sure and for certain. Come next spring, hopefully, Buddy will have a little sister. I can't imagine it'd be a boy, but even if . . . I'm ecstatic! I don't think I've ever been happier!" She threw her arms around his neck.

He lifted her into his arms, and praising the Lord, danced with her around the room.

"I did good!"



Beginning the next morning, Nathaniel doubled the time he spent praying for Evelyn and the new baby. Visions of a daughter in his old age thrilled him, but . . . Oh, Lord! Keep them both safe.

A week after her news, it dawned on him she hadn't mailed out any meeting request letters. He found her pounding on her Underwood. Slipping into his reading chair, he waited for her to finish her thoughts.



Having been under plenty of her harshest glares, he much preferred waiting over interrupting.

With a bit of flair, she hit a key with her pointer finger then swiveled in her chair toward him. She glowed and sparkled. "I love you."

How could he not be elated with her? "I love you, too, my beautiful angel. How's the story going? Got any pages ready for me?"

She hiked her off shoulder. "If you want, but I'd rather get Buddy's take first. Then you can see it after the rewrite."

"Still being tough on you?"

"Always and forever. Our son wants more action, and no girly stuff at all."

Nathaniel nodded. He'd loved hearing all the Rangering stories filled with Wallace Rusk's and Levi Baylor's many adventures in their younger days. "Understandable."

Throwing him a nod, she grinned. "Something I can help you with, my dear?"

"Not really. I was just wondering about the spring letters. Need any help? Or my usual signature?"

"I've been putting them off."

"Oh." Then before she could say more, the why hit him. He smiled. "Figured out a due date yet?"

She shook her head. "Gran thinks early April. I'm hoping for March."

"We can skip this spring if you want."

She nodded. "Might be for the best."

Over the next few days, he toyed with the idea of him and Buddy going by themselves, but without his songbird to lead praise and worship, nothing would be the same. The days piled one on top the other.

Hard to think he wouldn't be preaching until summer, but whatever she needed . . .

Two weeks later, everything changed.

While he washed and she dried the breakfast dishes, she hollered, dropped the wet plate, grabbed her belly, and doubled over.

He wrapped his arm around her back. "Evelyn! Honey! What's wrong?"

She looked up. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Help me."

"How? What can I do?"

"I need . . . to lie down a minute. It . . . hurts! So bad."

Helpless. He couldn't do anything to stop the pain, and he hated that. He helped her to their bed.

His mother rushed to his side. "What's wrong?"

"It's her stomach. It's paining her something terrible."

She pushed him to the side. "Go put some water on to boil."

"What?" He bent over a bit and looked her in the face. "Why would we need hot water?"

She glared. "Son, I need to examine her, and . . ." Throwing a nod toward the kitchen. "Just do as I say."

Evelyn grabbed his arm and squeezed, sobbing. "Go on, Nathaniel. Do as she asks."

He didn't like it, but did as his women folk told him. With the stove stoked and a big pot of water on, he eased back to his room but stopped short of the door.

"Nathaniel, get in here." His mother's normal soft voice had hardened to steel.

He joined her at the bedside. Evelyn's face told it all. He'd seen that height of pain before—on young, dying doughboys. But she couldn't be dying.

Not his Evelyn, his beloved. The reason he lived.

Stunned, he wavered. Bless her sweet heart, she tried her best not to show how much she was hurting. Her effort failed her.

"Go fetch Doc, Son."

The no he wanted to say turned around. "Yes, ma'am." What else could he do?

"Stop on the way and tell Buddy to run on home early. I might need him before you get back."

"Yes, ma'am."

Another mournful scream turned his mother toward him. "Don't let Doc come in his buggy. You make him come on with you right then. Don't take no for an answer."

"Yes, ma'am."

He backed toward the door. Everything in him hated leaving. All to blue blazes. But there was no one else to go. "Is it . . . the baby?"

His mother shook her head but avoided his eyes, only waved him off. "Go on, Son. Quicker you get gone, sooner you'll be back."



A car that sounded a lot like Buddy's father's pulled up to the schoolhouse. Man-sized footsteps creaked and vibrated the grayed porch boards, then the door flung open.

His old man looked at the teacher then him. "You're mother has taken sick. Gran wants you home. Now. I'm fetching the doctor. Get on and be quick about it."

Buddy jumped to his feet and bolted for the door. Someone said

something about his books, but he didn't care. He'd been ordered home, and exactly like Lord Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, wasn't his to wonder why. He'd either do or die.

While there were no cannons to his left or right, he paced himself. To get there fast as he could, couldn't run full out. How bad could it be?

That morning Mama had been singing and smiling.

What kind of sickness could come upon a body so suddenly? But fetching Doc never meant nothing good. But why? His mother was the best.

No one even compared to her.

He and his Holiness church folks believed in faith healing. Miracles, too.

Plus last he heard, his mama could still wear her wedding dress. Fit and trim and as pretty as ever. Even in her housecoat and slippers. With her hair fixed to the nines or not. She was the best.

Why his mother?

Was it some kind of test?

He stretched his stride, ignored the stitch painin' his side when it came, and pushed through to his second wind.

Dubs came out to meet him before he did the last mile. But how'd he know?

Must have been that old angel man. He must have told him Buddy would be coming home early. Smartest dog in Red River County, his Dubs, and maybe all of Texas. But he didn't have time to stop and love on him.

Needed to get to Gran's to help his mama.

"Hey, boy. How is she? How's Mama?" He never broke stride. The genius mutt turned and landed on Buddy's boot heels. He jumped the steps, caught the screen door, then stood in his mother's doorway before the thing slammed.

Gran glanced up. "Good, you're home. See if the water on the stove is boiling for me. And be careful, Broderick. Don't touch that pot. It'll be hot."

"Yes, ma'am. Then what?"

"Just be quiet. Your mama is hurting bad."

He leaned over a bit, but his mother didn't look at him. Her poor face glistened like she'd been swimming. Her eyes stayed closed, and her mouth all contorted like . . .

"Is she having my baby sister?"

"No, now go on."

"Yes, ma'am." The water bubbled some, but that wasn't what Gran ever meant by boiling, and it wasn't even close to rolling over the sides. He lifted the wood box. Half empty. He best bring in some

more.

Twice while he split some bigger pieces into stove size, screams stopped him short. If she wasn't having the baby, then why?

Something bad was afoot.

Why didn't Gran just tell him? He was ten years old now, a long way from being a baby.

Oh, Lord, is my mama dying?

But she was young.

The old man was nine years older. Mama couldn't be.

Had to be the baby. Gran must not have wanted to say. But why? Maybe some old wives' decided it'd be bad to speak of birthing while it was going on.

Like a pitcher with a no-hitter going—his teammates didn't even talk to him.

That had to be it.

Just time for the baby. And his father had gone to fetch the doctor. He loved it when he figured a thing out.

Keeling, he whistled. Dubs extracted himself from under the porch and raced toward him. Buddy braced himself as the mutt jumped on him.

He wrestled with his best friend until a dust cloud caught his eye.

The old man with Doc riding shotgun. They pulled to a stop right outside the front gate. He never parked the Ford there.

Had to be the baby coming.



# Chapter Twenty-seven

Evelyn swam in the pain.

“Help me, Father.”

Sweet blackness overshadowed her, and she stood on a beach next to an extraordinary crystal clear sea. A young lady walked toward her holding what looked like a newborn in her arms.

Was it Milly May? She'd be about this girl's age if she'd lived. But .

..

Evelyn tried to lift her foot, but it wouldn't cooperate. She looked down. Sand covered her ankles. Her gaze raised back to the girl and returned the child's big smile. Could it be her Milly May?

Or would she be Millicent now?

“Is that your baby?”

“Yes, ma'am. She's my sister.”

“What's her name?”

The beautiful child studied the babe a minute then met Evelyn's eyes again. “I don't know it. You and Daddy haven't named her yet.”

A knife jabbed her abdomen. Evelyn screamed but heard nothing. Her mouth wouldn't let the shriek out. She sunk into the pain, drowning. Searing hot.

Oh, Lord, help me.

“There's a doctor in Dallas who might be able to help.”

Who'd said that? She tried to open her eyes, but they didn't work either. What was happening? Was her baby in Heaven? No, it was only a dream, an hallucination.

“What would they do?”

“Surgery.”

Kill her daughter? With every bit of strength in her, Evelyn sat up. “No. You'll not kill my baby.” A double jab in her stomach drove her prone. She gritted her teeth and looked at Nathaniel. “Please. Don't let them kill our daughter.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks. “Sweetheart, I can't live without you.”

“Pray, my love.” She swallowed the pain. “Pray for a miracle. I can't lose another baby.”



A rooster crowed in the distance. Nathaniel lifted his head from his wife's bed. She looked terrible. He touched her forehead, burning with fever. How could he have fallen asleep while praying? Why wasn't God responding?

In obvious agony, she moaned.

How could he help her? He had to do something. He couldn't lose her, his everything.

He raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Father! There's nothing too hard for You. I can't live without her. Take me instead! If You won't heal her, take me, too! Command the infection to leave and save the child for her sake. I'll do anything, Lord. Tell me what to do."

A hand rested on his shoulder, pulling him from his prayer. "Son, you need to get some rest. I'll sit with her."

Every weary cell in his body screamed agreement, but he couldn't leave Evelyn's side, couldn't quit praying. He had to believe and not doubt . . .

But she was in so much pain and looked so weak.

Fresh hot tears rolled down his cheeks. "I can't, Ma."

Accepting the cool cloth she offered, he turned to minister to his wife. The antiseptic smell of alcohol wafted in the stale air. He swabbed her forehead then bathed her arms, one at a time.

She opened her eyes. "We need to settle on a name for our daughter."

Tears welled. Why was she doing that to herself?

"Whatever you want, sweetheart."

Her lips parted like she was trying to smile, but the expression missed its mark. "I like Cecelia . . . after Mama. You pick the middle name." Her whisper was barely audible.

"Rose after Mother and Grandma." Tears overwhelmed him. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be."

"I've prayed, but . . ." He broke down and wept. "I . . . must not have enough . . . faith. Or you and the baby would be fine. I've failed you, and . . ." He pressed his head on the bed and bawled. She patted his head like he was the one at Heaven's gate and she wanted to ease his passing.

If only that could be true.

"Hey, Mama. You better?"



Nathaniel filled his lungs, sniffed,

then wiped his cheek. “Hey, Bud. Get a good night's sleep?”



Buddy stepped into the room. “Finest kind. Anyone want coffee? Man, I had me a great dream.” He eased to the side of the bed next to his father.

His mother didn't look so good, but her eyes seemed to try to smile.

“I was on the side of a real neat lake having a tea party with my sisters—both of them.” He grinned real big. “Did you know I have two sisters in Heaven? Millicent and Cece Rose. Milly's older than me, and Rosie is . . . oh.”

Tears welled then ran down his cheeks.

“She was just in your tummy, but now she's in Heaven.”

That's why the old man was crying.

Buddy tried not to, but a flood of sorrow washed over his face. He hated it when he couldn't hold back the tears.

His mother held her arm out. “Come here, Son, and kiss me.”

He leaned into her embrace, careful not to put any weight on her. For the longest, she hugged him, then cried with him.

Wait.

Was she going to Heaven, too?

He didn't want her to. Could that be what Millicent tried to tell him last night right before the baby spilled her tea? Why did Milly have to die? And CeCe Rose?

It would be so much fun to have two sisters.

He'd be a good brother.

Never pull their pigtails or make them squeal. When they ran away, he'd let them stay one step ahead of him. And if any boy ever acted mean toward either one, or even looked at them wrong, he'd give the guy a pounding he wouldn't forget.

“Buddy.” Her voice sounded so weak.

He looked up and sniffed hard. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Go see if Gran needs anything.”

“Yes, ma'am.” He backed away a step. “I love you, Mama.”

“I know, my precious.” She sort of tried to smile. “I love you, too.”

He found his grandmother sitting on the front porch snapping field peas. He pulled his favorite rope-bottom chair up next to her. She stopped breaking the pods and hugged him real tight.

“Is Mama going to die?”



For the longest, Gran didn't say anything, then she kissed his cheek. "Bible says it's assigned to each man—that includes us ladies, too—once to die, then judgement. Today is your mother's time."

"But she isn't old."

"No one's promised tomorrow. Age doesn't matter when it's your time."

"I dreamed about my sisters last night. Milly's older, and Rosie is a baby, but not too little. We had tea, but she spilled hers."

"Little ones are clumsy sometimes. You used to knock over your milk glass a lot."

"I remember that." He nodded. "Dad would get mad, but mama would hush him with a kiss, then clean up my mess."

"Promise me something, Gran."

"What's that, Son?"

Leaning close, he looked into her eyes. "Don't die for a long time."

She grinned and scrunched both shoulders. "Not for me to say, sugar. Only the Lord knows when it'll be my time, but my mother lived to be ninety, and I'm not there yet."

"Good. You think the reason Mama's going to Heaven is on account of my sisters needing her there?"

"Could be. The Lord works in mysterious ways."

Buddy had heard that a lot of times, but wasn't sure exactly what that meant. He'd also heard Heaven was a beautiful place. "Will Mama be sick there, too?"

"Oh, no. Jesus said He'll wipe away all tears, plus, she'll have a big mansion to live in . . ." She kissed his cheek. "Truth be known, I'm a bit jealous of your mama. I'm pert near ready myself to go home, but it isn't my time. Not yet."

Talking with Gran always helped things be better, except his mama dying made his heart hurt real bad. Maybe he could visit her some in Heaven, have tea with her and his sisters. That thought warmed him some, but the tears kept leaking out.

"Gran?"

"Yes, darlin'."

"Do you need anything? Mama told me to ask."



A thick fog engulfed Evelyn.

Her hand appeared as only a gray shadow when she held it out. Nathaniel's prayers surrounded her, but she couldn't tell where he

was. She patted beside her—still in the bed. She reached out, but couldn't feel her husband's head.

The fog parted.

She stood on the same shore as before. Across the crystal clear water, a whole crowd of folks gathered. She shaded her eyes. "Mama. Daddy. I'm coming." She picked out so many familiar faces. "PawPaw. It's you!"

Her grandfather held out his hand. "You're still my favorite. I've been waiting for you, Evie."

Right in front of the throng, Millicent held baby Cecilia. She tried to step toward them, but her foot wouldn't move. She looked down. Sand covered her ankles just like before.

"Please, Lord, heal her. Restore her to me."

She opened her eyes to the room, darkened with only one lamp. She opened her mouth, but only a creaky whisper came out. She swallowed then with great difficulty, spoke his name.

"Nathaniel."

"Yes, beloved?"

"I love you."

"Ohh, I love you, too, my dearest."

She took his hand, squeezed, then closed her eyes.

Her feet finally free from the silty sand, and all her pain suddenly ended, she stepped toward the Crystal Sea.

"Evelyn, don't go! Lord God, no! Heal her. Let her stay with me. I need her more than anything! I can't live without her. Evelyn, don't go!" He wept.

Without looking back, she put her foot on the sea, then somehow, found herself on the far shore, her beautiful baby girl in her arms. All those she loved who'd gone before her—and a few faces she didn't know—surrounded her.

They made over Rosie and patted Evelyn on the back, kissing her.

"Evelyn, I'm so glad you made it, sweet girl."

The lady looked familiar, standing next to PawPaw.

"I'm Susannah, your MawMaw, your mama's mother. I get to show you around when you're ready. I've been looking so forward to getting to know you."

The lady in the picture with PawPaw on Mama's bedroom wall.

"And this is my mother, Patricia Abbot. We're all so glad you're here, sweet girl."

"But Nathaniel."

The lovely young girl stepped up and hugged her waist. "He'll be alright, Mama. Buddy, too. You don't have to worry about anything here." She leaned out. "Want me to come with you on your tour?"

"I'd love that."

“Wait til you see. It's so beautiful. And Rosie and I get to live with you in your mansion now. Yeshua's been getting it all ready it for you!”

Milly's eyes sparkled like diamonds. Her oldest daughter's namesake stepped forward. “It's so good to see you again, my dear Evie.”

“MayMee.”

“Just like your novel, dear, you are now free indeed.”

She'd made it.

She was home.



# Chapter Twenty-

## eight

Nathaniel fasted and prayed until they lowered his beloved into the ground. He couldn't believe his eyes when the first shovelful of dirt hit her pine box. He listened with all his might.

With each toss of soil, hope faded.

The Lord could have brought her back.

God could have given him a miracle.

The diggers, two cowboys from his cousin's ranch, patted the mound tight, tipped their hats toward him, then walked away.

One by one, family, neighbors, and friends left. Some patting his shoulder, most not. He stayed beside her grave.

What would he do without her? He never believed she'd really passed, no matter what Ma had said. He expected a miracle. His anticipation had been great.

So many would've come to the Lord . . . but nothing.

No miracle.

His beloved left him. Gone. Dead and buried.

He might as well have died, too.

He had nothing.

A gentle hand touched his shoulder and stayed there.

Buddy.

His mother stood just behind the boy. "Come on home, Son. A storm's brewing."

He looked at her.

His son's eyes were red, but had no tears.

The old timers always claimed getting them in the ground brought some relief, but he found no truth in it.

His life was over, buried with Evelyn.

"Dad, come on. A lot of folks are coming to the house. We got to go."

He stared at the boy then let him pull him to his feet.

For a while, he sat the wake, watching the people mill about and eat; visit as though his whole world hadn't caved in on him. He didn't want to hear about how pretty or generous or what a good writer she'd been.

All in the past tense.

He didn't want to hear any funny stories about his Evelyn.

Nothing could bring her back.

God could have, but He'd forsaken Nathaniel, ignored his prayers.

Without a word, he retreated to his room. He stretched out crossways on the bed, the one she'd died in, then rolled over and stared at the ceiling.

For the longest, he stayed there then remembered the promise he'd made to her so long ago.

Slipping off the bed, he walked to the door then through the parlor. Only a few of his cousins remained, but he spoke to no one, and not a soul spoke to him. He marched into his mother's room.

In the top of the closet, over in the corner, he retrieved his father's bottle. He held it to the side of his off leg and returned to his room. He set it on her writing table and stared at the brown bottle.

How many times had his father done the same thing?

Idle question.

His old man never cracked the seal, but . . . not his intent. He twisted the cap. The paper tore. Another turn freed the cap. He threw it across the room and turned the bottle up.

The first gulp burned all the way down. Second not so much. Third smooth as cool buttermilk on a hot afternoon.



Buddy waited until the last two ladies left. Praise the Lord, they'd done the dishes, all of them, dried and put away. He'd been thinking he'd be using the dish towel the whole rest of the night. He might have had to wash, too.

Gran looked pretty tired.

Burying a person sure wasn't easy on anyone. She hugged him real tight then held him out. "Did you ever see your pa eat anything?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think he did. Not breakfast neither."

A big sigh came out of her. She shook her head, eyes half closed. She looked really old. "Hardly said six words the last three days, but . . ."

Buddy hated telling on his father, but Gran needed to know. "He got Grandpa's whiskey bottle from your room."

"I know." She nodded. "I saw."

"Should I check on him?"

"No, leave him be."

"Gran, he's not a drinking man."

A funny little chuckle escaped. "He once was."

"Really?"

"Afraid so. Long time ago, but your mama got him to stop."

So his old man had been a drinker. He couldn't imagine.

Though he waited, she didn't tell any more of the story. He hated it when she treated him like a baby. A body would think double digits made him big enough to hear.

"When did that happen?"

Her eyebrow hiked. He liked that expression of hers. It went real high. "Best get him to tell you some other day. You hungry?"

"I could eat. Any of that buttermilk pie left?"

"I believe so."

"Whipped cream?"

"Yes, sir." She tussled his hair. "Come on. We'll have dessert first then see if we want anything else."

His mama always claimed Buddy could be asleep before his head hit the pillow, but not that night. He missed her something awful already.

What would he and his father do without her?

Would he still go out and preach tent meetings next spring, and who would write all those letters to set up all the places? Who'd lead the singing? Who'd cook?

Concern over the old man kept him awake.

Lost track of the stupid sheep he counted, and kept having to start over with each bump or bang from his parents' room. What could he be doing in there?

Maybe he'd drunk so much whiskey he couldn't walk like those old soldiers who wandered into the meeting sometimes.

Finally, he figured he might as well get up. Only one thing to do. He slipped on his flannel shirt then eased his door open and tiptoed to the old man's door. Light shone from the crack under it.

His oil lamp burned bright, but where . . . the bed was ruffled, but empty. He tiptoed toward the water closet, then spotted him.

Why would he sleep on the floor? Buddy pulled on his arm. His father barely moved. He reeked of whiskey. His smell gagged Buddy. Oh, mercy! What a stench. Oh . . . he was laying in vomit.

Took three wet towels, but he got him cleaned up and into bed. About busted a gut, but the old man woke up enough to help a bit then snuggled into the covers like he'd been freezing on the floor.

After wadding the towels and soiled suit pants and smelly white shirt into a big ball, he stuffed it into the rumble seat of the Ford then climbed back into bed really tired.

The storm Gran had felt in her bones rolled in with plenty of flashes and rolling thunder. For a bit, he listened to the rain on the roof. It tipped him over the edge.

He woke with his head under the quilts and pulled his covers

down enough to peek out. Ooowee.

Colder than a welldigger's boots, but the sun shone brightly through his window. What day was it? Wednesday? He had school. Except, he really didn't want to go.

His old man needed him. Since Mama was gone.

That day and the next, he stayed home, then on the third one after her funeral, his father insisted he return to his studies, even drove him with a promise to pick him up that afternoon.

Miss Nabors gushed over him something awful. He wanted her to hush before she made him cry again. His friends acted like they didn't know what to say and steered clear of him all day.

When she finally rang the bell and dismissed class, he ran out to find the old man for his ride home.

But no Ford, no dad. He started walking toward home. Found him drunk in the Roadster on the side of the road, about two miles from school. At least he'd thrown up out the window. Got all over the side of the car though.

On the bright side, he got to drive home. His mother would have had a cow over it, but what choice did he have? And she wasn't there any more. He wouldn't mind hearing her fuss again.



Of all her sons, Lacey Rose loved Nathaniel best. How could she not? He was Charley's boy, and that man—for all his shenanigans—would always be her one true love.

Loved Buddy more than the other grandchildren, too. That child was his father's own son though, and she was about ready to skin them both alive.

Six month's of swilling enough booze to float a battleship hadn't done her son one bit of good. Stayed drunk right through the winter.

Hadn't ministered one time either, even though he'd been asked a time or two to stand in at a couple of churches in the Valley.

And her grandson doing his best to cover it up, too. Either the poor kid cleaned up after his pa pretty well or flat dab lied about it.

She hated it all the way around the stump.

First day of spring, found Nathaniel in his bed. Buddy got himself



ready for school. Only the good Lord knew how many days he'd missed.

"Where's the car, sugar? I didn't see it this morning."

Buddy looked at his breakfast plate and shook his head. "He sold it."

Bless the Lord, exactly what she needed. "Do me a favor before you go to school."

"Yes, ma'am. Need more wood for the box?"

"You can see to that this evening. But before leaving for school, I want you to let the air out of the truck's tires."

Why would she want him to do that? He stared into her eyes, begging. "Gran, he promised he'd quit. We need the truck."

"Your pa doesn't need to be going anywhere! It's a wonder he hasn't broke his fool neck driving around loaded."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll see to it on my way out."

Midmorning, her son wandered out of his room and made his way to the kitchen. She waited until he finished his second cup of coffee, then filled his mug, and sat across from him. "You sober?"

He nodded.

"What do you think Evelyn would think of you?"

He pursed his lips and shook his head, like he couldn't believe she had invoked his wife's name, but didn't answer.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

He sat back in his chair. "She would think I fulfilled my promise to her. I told her I'd not touch another drop of hard liquor for the rest of her natural born days." He sniffed then swallowed. "Never dreamed she'd go before me."

"What about God? What's He think?"

He stared out the window for a bit then looked back and met her eye. "Right this minute, Mama? I just don't care."



Hope springs eternal. Someone said that.

Buddy couldn't remember exactly where he'd heard or read that piece of wisdom, but two full weeks of the old man on the wagon sure had his hopewell overflowing that next August.

Then like the devil had one more trick up his sleeve, a whiskey truck broke down right across from the field where he and the old man were hauling hay. Of course, it was his preferred brand, Jack Daniels.

A case of half price Black Label wasted sobriety and the hay

hauling money.

School started up again, but Buddy figured he best keep on picking cotton with his father.

Gran hated the thought, but agreed the Reverend staying straight was way more important than Buddy reading about dead presidents or trying to figure out long division.

Even with all the missed days, he was two years ahead of the kids his age.

Plus getting paid at the end of each day proved a pretty big boon, the temptation too great. Hard work, but it paid well and let him keep a closer eye on his father.

Once again the devil raised his ugly head.

That fateful morn twenty-three days before his eleventh birthday, Buddy woke early and got the coffee on before he tapped on the old man's door.

Nothing.

He tried the handle. The knob twisted in his hand. He peeked in. How many times had he seen it before? The bed rumpled but empty. Where had his old man got off to so early?



The boy deserved so much more. Nathaniel kept putting one foot in front of the other, staying in the middle of the road so as not to trip in the dark.

His son had been such a blessing the past year, and he figured on getting him that twenty-two he'd been drooling over for his birthday.

Help make up for all the times he'd let his kid down. After all, he'd lost his mother, too. Even thinking of it stabbed his heart, and tears welled in the early morning's pitch-black. He swiped at his cheek.

Always darkest before the dawn.

Might be true far as a day was concerned, but not for him.

Since his beloved passed, there'd been no dawning. His sunshine had gone, disappeared. His life would never be the same. Had he loved her too much? If he had . . . how could he have loved her less?

He sighed and looked skyward, but didn't speak to God. Hadn't since the day he buried Evelyn.

What good would it do?

Praise be, Harcourt sent her royalty checks twice a year, like clockwork, and the fall check should be waiting in his box. He'd buy the rifle for Buddy and maybe something for his mother.

Like he figured, once the sun topped the treetops, he caught a ride on into Clarksville. Then, again as he surmised, her check waited in his post office box.

The amount was less than he'd hoped for, but plenty enough for what he wanted. Rifle in hand from the smith, he found a nice bolt of cloth at the Mercantile, then visited the jeweler.

She'd always claimed she didn't want any fancy presents, but her expression whenever his Pa brought her some shiny trinket belied her words.

A gold chain and diamond encrusted cross would be a nice down payment on what he owed her for all the trouble he'd caused her the last year.

On the way out of town, like the fool he was, he veered off Main Street to the bootlegger's house. Promised himself only a little taste for the walk home, but . . .



Buddy put Dubs on his dad's trail. The mutt tracked him along the dead center of their county road, then lost the scent on the main drag into town. Looked like someone had given him a ride.

He stuck his thumb out, and the fourth truck let him and the dog ride in the back.

Only took him ten questions to find out he'd been to the post office, bank, gunsmith, and jeweler, but past that, no one had seen him.

After another twenty inquiries, he talked with a lady who'd seen him at the bootlegger's house, buying a mason jar's worth of moonshine then getting into a truck with a man she didn't know.

As promised, he made it back home half an hour before dark—with no old man in tow.

Gran had a mess of greens seasoned with bacon boiled just right and a golden brown, fried chop. She served him a plate with a nice slab of cornbread alongside. Hunting his father really worked up an appetite.

After supper, he sat the porch with her, hoping against hope that lady had mistaken someone else for his father.

Who could he have gone with and why wasn't he home? Above all else, he hoped the old man had a perfectly good reason for leaving without a word and then running so late getting home.

He didn't give voice to his hopes. A part of him took comfort in

the probable reality that the Reverend Nathaniel Nightingale was off drunk, drowning the sorrow of lost love in a jar of moonshine.

But he never made it before bedtime. Guess he passed out somewhere and would sleep it off.

Come mid-morning or so, he'd be back—all sorrowful with a mouthful of promises.

Early the next morning, after a fitful night of wondering what had happened, a knock sounded on the front door.

Gran hollered from the kitchen. "Who in the world? Buddy, can you get that? Just getting the biscuits in the oven."

"Sure thing." He ran and opened it to a deputy sheriff. Buddy stepped out onto the porch, closing the door behind him as quietly as he could, but out she came. The man looked over him and talked with his grandmother.

"Found Nathaniel, ma'am. He's beat up pretty bad, but if not for the three cracked ribs doc said he could have come home today. As it is, he wants to keep him overnight. Keep an eye on him to make sure."

Buddy wanted to take the truck then and there and fetch him home, but Gran wouldn't have it. "We know where he is, and maybe it's exactly what he needed. He's been heading to ground ever since . . ."

"Can I go see him?"

She shook her head. "Leave him be. He made this bed. Let him lay in it a while."

Seemed cruel to Buddy, but . . . maybe she was right.



The third morning back, it couldn't wait. Nathaniel hated eating crow, but he'd cooked his own goose. Time to face the music. He threw back the covers, grabbed his robe, and limped to the kitchen.

His mother jumped to her feet and threw her arms around him. "I love you, Son. Bless the Lord."

He didn't want to admit it, but God had saved his worthless life. "Yes." He nodded toward Buddy who stared at his face. "Praise the Lord, and never forget His benefits."

The boy's eyes misted, but he managed a smile. Nathaniel eased into his seat and took the cup his mother offered. "One month from today, I plan on leaving."

Buddy grinned. "Where we going, old man?"

"South, I'm not sure yet, but we'll find somewhere to pitch the

tent. I plan on preaching the good news.”

“Yes, sir. Sounds good to me.”

Gran patted his hand. “Son, you can preach right here. I’ll put the word out. Plenty of pulpits needs filling.”

“No, ma’am. Can’t do that. I see her everywhere I go. Been sleeping in the bed we shared. No, Ma. If I can make a month, I’ll be good to go.”

“Why a month?”

“Our anniversary is twenty-nine days from today, so . . .” He smiled. “When that man put his pistol to my head, I prayed for the first time since we put her in the ground. And the Lord saved my worthless life.”

Of its own, a snort escaped.

“That robber beat the fool out of me alright, but I deserved worse.”

Tears filled his mother’s eyes. “I understand.”

“Figured we could find someone to live here with you. One of the cousins maybe.”

She wiped her cheeks then found a smile. “For sure and for certain, someone a bit sprier than this old lady.”



# Epilogue

The twenty-ninth day came, but other than a few tears, the old man kept his word and didn't run off and get soaked. Thrilled Buddy to no end.

Next morning, it took his father, him, and the new old lady sitter Gran had found three whole hours to get the trailer hooked to the truck and stocked up. Tires needed air, and oil had to be topped off.

After Buddy added water to the radiator, she pulled him aside. "Now if he goes to drinking, you write me a letter and you tell an adult . . . maybe the preacher at one of the churches y'all will stop at."

"I will, Gran."

"And I want you to write to me either way. Here's the address." She stuffed a folded paper into his shirt pocket. "Your mama, she wrote regular, but I don't suppose your daddy will, so I'm counting on you to let me know what's going on, Broderick."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll write every week."

"Well, that'd be good, but it's alright if it isn't every week. Keep up your learning, Buddy. Practice your numbers and read while you're driving places. Maybe your pa will enjoy that, too."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Buddy! You got everything?"

"Yes, sir."

Finally, nothing left but the leaving.

Tears and kisses and a whole lot of hugging went on, then it was time. The Reverend took the wheel. Buddy would see about that later, once away from Gran and her fussing about it being dangerous and how he was too young to drive.

She stood on the porch with the new lady, looking a bit frail and frazzled. Dubs sat on his haunches next to her. Buddy climbed in but left the door open. "You coming, boy?"

Dubs didn't move or whine or nothing.

"You sure?"

The dog looked to Gran then laid down with his muzzle on his paws.

Buddy closed the door. "We're burning daylight."

## The End

Please enjoy the first chapter of the last installment of these Texas Romances. Sad for this author—I know not how I can leave these characters I've come to love. Now for your pleasure, book **ten** ~



# Chief of Sinners

## Chapter One

*Fall 1926*

God always tests His sons. From Adam on, He's required absolute obedience from those He calls to greatness. Such a man, Broderick Eversole Nightingale, known to all as Buddy came into the world in the afterglow of the Azusa Street Revival.

From his earliest memories, his father preached and practiced the power of the Holy Ghost while his saintly mother led the singing under the canvas canopy of the family's traveling gospel meetings.

Buddy's first test came at the age of ten when his mother fell deathly ill. He never dreamed to blame God when she went home, but his father did, and for that first year after she left, the Reverend Nightingale drowned his sorrow in moonshine.

Broke of heart and pocketbook, the boy's father returned to the only solace he knew, preaching the good news. While he no longer invited people to come and be healed, reports of past miracles and his fiery oratories always kept the revival tent full.

The second test came fourteen months later in a small Texas Hill Country community. That fateful day started like so many others.

After obtaining their permit, the Nightingales pulled into the fairgrounds, unloaded their tent, and began work. By midmorning, they had the canvas spread and the poles up.

Buddy held the first peg while his father tap-started it. He stood back. Five whacks later, he tied off the guy rope then scooted to the next peg. A second passed before he squinted against the sun and looked up at his father.

For October, the day heated unseasonably warm, and the old reverend's face glistened with sweat as he leaned on the double-headed mallet.

"What's the matter, Old Man? Not getting tired, are you?"

"Who you calling old?"

Buddy smiled. "Here, let me have that thing. I wouldn't want the great Nathaniel Nightingale too tuckered to preach tonight."

"Have at it."

Finding his spot, Buddy tap-started another peg then stood back and eyeballed the alignment. Perfect. Slowly he raised the oversized

wooden hammer, held it a second over his head, then pulled down hard.

The hickory head hit the peg a glancing blow, and the mallet slipped from his hands. The stake flew one direction, the hammer another.

His dad laughed. "You practice a while, Little Man. I need a drink."

Buddy restarted the peg and a dozen blows later had it in place. He tied off the rope then stepped back. Another fifteen pegs and the tent would be finished. Sure hoped coming to this one-horse town would be worth it.

The Lord knew they needed the money. He worked steady setting the pegs.

"You not finished yet?"

He glanced up at his father. "Mine are all done, but some of yours need a little attention."

The elder nodded. "Oh, I see how you are. Give me that mallet, boy. We're burning daylight."

An hour later, the wooden hammer slammed down on the last peg. Mopping his brow with his handkerchief, the old man then flipped him a half-dollar. "Get you some dinner, Son. I'm going to catch some shut-eye."

He pocketed the coin then tied off the last rope. Hands on his hips, he admired their work. The patch-on-patch tent didn't look half bad. It'd last until they could afford a new one—maybe Mama's next royalty check—provided the old man stopped giving away the tent money.

Working his way toward the town square, Buddy nailed up flyers, then blew a dime of his dinner money on a Moon Pie and Coca-Cola.

Marble Falls, Texas looked like a dozen other towns where his father had pitched the tent in the last year. Figured if expenses got covered, it'd be a miracle.

A brand new '26 Ford Coupe bouncing down Main Street caught his eye. Maybe there was some money to be had there after all. He decided to forget lunch and finish passing out the flyers.

The nicest homes surrounded the town square, as in most rural communities. Buddy skipped the first two streets, walking outward, since the well-to-do usually didn't truck with Holiness folks.

Episcopalians and Presbyterians looked down their noses at Pentecostals, while the more rigid Baptists and Methodists didn't look at all, preferring to pretend Holy Rollers simply didn't exist, not as a real church anyway.

Experience taught him the farther away from the square, the more receptive the people.

He gave away his last flyer and headed to the campgrounds where he busied himself arranging crates and two-by-twelve planks used for pews. The setup wasn't fancy, but that wasn't what God's children came for.

The old man claimed they came for more reasons than Buddy understood.

A bit before dusk, he lit the Coleman lanterns that hung from every other tentpole.

His stomach reminded him he'd only had a Moon Pie for lunch. He'd check the larder in the trailer. Judging by changes of hues in the orange and golden sky, should be time to fix something before he woke the old man.

Buddy ignored the snores and rummaged through the cupboard. A can of sardines, almost a whole line of crackers, and a fried pie later, he peeked out the curtain. Half a dozen cars and two wagons littered the gravel lot beyond the tent.

Not bad.

The faithful were coming. Hopefully, they brought some folding money in their bib overalls.

The rhythmic snorting and huffing echoed across the little trailer. A good long nap always meant a fiery sermon, and nothing touched a believer's purse like hell fire and brimstone. He peeked again.

A car's headlights illuminated a fair amount of foot traffic.

Better get the Reverend up and at it.

Time was a wasting. He poked his father. "Hey, sleepyhead, time for church."

The elder Nightingale turned to the wall. "Leave me alone."

"Come on, Dad. The tent's getting' full."

The reverend rolled over. "Tell 'em I'm sick."

"Get up." He shook him. "They're coming to see you, the great Nathaniel Nightingale, renowned miracle worker and faith healer."

Nothing.

And mocking always got a rise.

Buddy sniffed then held his nose close to his father's mouth. "Oh, good grief."

He rolled him over. An empty Mason jar wedged between the bed and the wall slipped a notch.

"What am I supposed to do now?" He grabbed his father's shoulders and shook hard. "What have you gone and done? Get up."

Twice more he shook and shouted, but didn't even get an 'I'm sick'. Buddy checked out the little window again. The tent was full, and folks were milling about.

He had to face them, tell them something. Faith healers weren't supposed to get sick. Slowly, he changed into his meeting clothes,

letting his mind run through a list of possible excuses.

If he'd only known.

Of course, he should have figured it out. Mercy! He straightened his string tie, threw his shoulders back like his mother had taught him, and sallied forth to meet the throng. His stomach growled.

The tent, overflowing, buzzed with a quiet chatter.

Oh, how he wanted to take his usual place in the back and wait for his cue to throw down the hat, which really was an old Stetson. The old man claimed some rancher left it in one of his first tent meetings.

Put it to good use ever since.

But he couldn't go to the back this time.

They came expecting a show, some maybe to hear God's Word preached. Buddy hated to tell them otherwise.

So much for breaking even.

All that work for nothing.

Slipping through the tent's back flap, he jumped up on the small platform—no more than three two-by-four frames with more planks on top. The crowd noise abated, then finally died.

Every eye in the house looked stuck on him.

Oh, Lord, what am I gonna do?

Hesitating only a second, with his heart about to beat right out of his chest, he swallowed hard. "Folks?" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat and spoke louder. "Evening, folks." He walked to the edge of the well-worn boards.

"Just over two years ago, my mama died birthing my little sister." What could he say to make them understand? Overwhelmed, he wiped a real tear off his cheek. Never asked to be up there in front. "Today." He swallowed. "It would've been my parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary."

Swallowing kept getting harder. It amazed him that he was telling all those strangers private family business. "My dad . . . he thought he could preach tonight, but—" His lip quivered, and a lump clogged his throat.

Stepping back, he looked out over the tops of people's heads and hats.

What came next?

A strange, pleasant tingling began in the small of his back then spread up his spine. Before he figured out what the sensation might be, it filled him, encompassed him.

A golden mist fell from the tent's roof like a heavy fog.

Mesmerized him. He'd never seen such a thing.

It covered the congregation, then a peace settled over his heart, slowing its pounding.

One crystal clear note sounded in his head.

A thousand voices in perfect harmony followed. The song danced through his soul until he became one with it. Almost unaware, he tried to hold back the music, wanting to listen longer.

But it bubbled forth. And he sang.

Not one of the tired old hymns his father loved so much.

A new song. One like his mother used to sing.

The mist lifted while he sang, but he couldn't quit. Didn't want to stop. At first, the people only sat and watched wide-eyed like a treed ringtail caught in a spotlight. Then a young girl in the back caught the chorus and joined in.

Soon the whole tent erupted with the song.

When that tune finished, another sprang from that secret place the mist had opened.

Oblivious to everything but the melody in his soul, he sang, and the congregation followed. Hours later, must have sung three dozen songs, the floodgate finally closed.

What had happened? He couldn't believe it.

Never in his twelve years had he heard the likes of such music. And it'd come out of his mouth.

Buddy let the last note drift away, not knowing what to say or do next, so . . . he only stared at the people. They stared back.

Amazement etched most faces, but it soon disappeared. A few folks in the back drifted into the night.

One man with a little girl draped over his shoulder sound asleep, eased forward. When the farmer reached the little platform, he shifted his daughter, fumbled in his pocket, then tossed several bills at Buddy's feet.

Before he knew it, others followed the man's example, and a small pile of greenbacks covered his boots.

When the last person left the tent, the peace left Buddy's soul.

Doubt and self-loathing took its place.

Somehow, he tricked those folks. Not on purpose, but he definitely hadn't given them what they came for. All he'd done was sing a few songs. In the morning, when the town folk realized what happened, they'd want their money back.

Quickly, he crammed the bills into his shirt and ran to the trailer.

"Hey, Old Man." Buddy shook his father's shoulder. "We gotta get out of here."

"What?" The elder Nightingale opened one eye. "Give me another forty winks. I'm sick, Son."

Buddy tried twice more to rouse him then gave up. He would have to do it by himself.

Methodically, he went about gathering the planks and crates and

disassembling the platform, loading it as he went. He packed the Coleman lanterns and arranged the wood along the bottom of the truck like he had done a hundred times before.

Though never by himself.

The urgency to get away increased with each task he completed. Every few minutes, he glanced around expecting to see an angry mob descending on him, demanding their money back.

The sun broke over the eastern horizon just as he untied the first support rope. Using the wooden mallet, he hit the tent peg to the side then yanked on it. Thing wouldn't budge. He whopped it again and pulled with all his might. Nothing.

"Mercy."

Stepping back, he swung full force against the peg. The mallet struck a glancing blow, slipped out of his hands, and sailed toward the trailer. Slamming into the sheet metal, it missed the window but put a good-sized dent right between it and the door.

Frustration boiled over. He kicked the immovable peg then hopped a circle on one foot. Pain racked his big toe.

What should he do? He had to get out of there.

Tears welled, but he stubbornly wiped them away. Crying sure wouldn't help any. He had to get those blasted pegs up and the tent down before the people came back—be gone before his deceit became known.

"Mercy, boy."

Buddy wheeled around. His father stood in the trailer's door.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing?"

"Please, Dad. Help me get this tent down. We've got to get out of here."

Rumpled and needing a shave, the elder lumbered toward him. "What are you talking about? We just got here. Why would we want to leave so soon?"

Between glances over his shoulder, Buddy explained what had happened the night before. When he finished, he grabbed the tent peg again and pulled. "We've got to hurry. It's daylight, and they'll be here any minute."

The old man grabbed him and pulled him to his chest. "No one's coming after their money, Son." His voice cracked. Was he going to cry? "Everything's fine." He cleared his throat. "Sounds like God gave you a gift last night. Confirmed it with this cash. Lord, I wish I could have seen it."

Buddy pulled away.

If only he could believe what the old man said. "Nuh-uh. You're the one with the gift. Even Mama said so. They'll be here any minute, wanting it all back." Did his dad know for sure? "Won't they?"

“Nope. Listen to me, Boy. You didn't trick anyone. When folks give their money to the Lord, they never ask for it back.”

“You mean all that cash . . . is ours?”

“Sure is. Ain't the Lord good?”

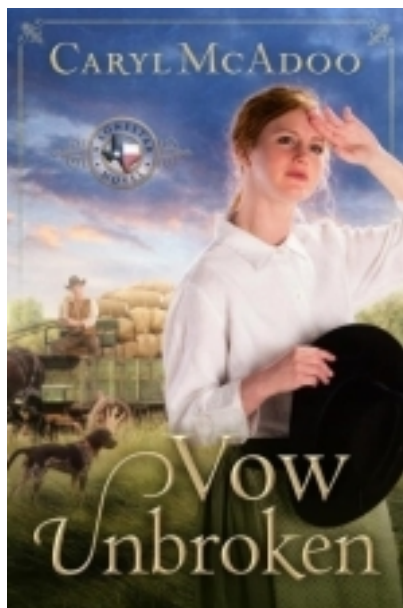
Visions of new shoes and store-bought shirts danced through Buddy's head. All that money, and all he did was sing a few songs.

“Wow, Dad. You think maybe they'll come back tonight? I could sing some more.”

“Aboslutely.” His father wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “I'm sure of it, Son.”

# Caryl's Titles' Five-Star Reviews

## Historical Texas Romances



...for [Vow Unbroken](#)

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance.

--*Publishers Weekly*

After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults. --Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*

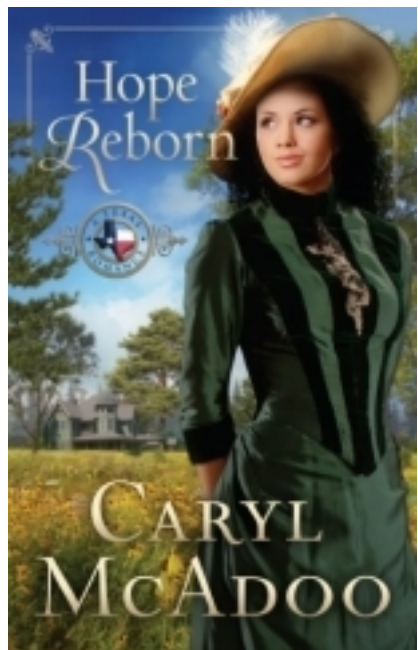




...for [Hearts Stolen](#)

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen* grabbed me at the start. Sassy's feisty, fighting spirit...I couldn't set it down. Burnt dinner, but forget eating, I ate this book up. This master storyteller weaves Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters. --Holly Michael, author

[Crooked Lines](#)



...for [Hope Reborn](#)

With memorable characters, Caryl's signature humor, and plenty of

adventure, drama, and romance, “Hope Reborn” is anything but fluff. A strong message of salvation runs through, but well within the storyline. Enjoyed a unique twist with May writing the stories of the previous characters – clever and fun!

--Pam Morrison,  
Tennessee reader



## ... [Sins of the Mothers](#)

I tell you what, folks, this girl can write! I do love this series, and maybe most especially this book. Mary Rachel Buckmeyer can out-negotiate the experts, out-guess marketing trends, and out-stubborn a mule. Trouble is, she tends to follow her heart into disaster. The guy she marries has meandering eye, lies like a braided rug, and has all the loyalty of a new-born pup. Mary hops from one frying pan to another until one man shows up who could steady her and get her out of the fixes she gets herself into. Such a great story! I know you'll love.

--Anne Baxter Campbell, author *The Truth Trilogy: The Roman's Quest, Marcus Varitor, Centurion*, and *The Truth Doesn't Die*



## ...Daughters of the Heart

A fun packed Christian romance novel with plenty of action, heartbreak, tears, deception, twists, and turns. [The three sisters] made a pact never to break their father's heart, but when suitors show up, it's hard for them to stay determined. Will they find true love? Will Dad accept a suitor for them and give his blessings?

--Joy Gibson, a Tennessee reader and pastor's wife



...for [Just Kin](#)

I have followed this historical romance series from the beginning and they just keep getting better. Lacey Rose loves Charley and is devastated when he leaves to fight for Texas with the Confederate army. Charley doesn't realize Lacey Rose is in love with him but is both surprised and pleased with the goodbye kiss she gives him. After Charley sends a hurtful letter trying to discourage her from waiting for him, Lacey Rose runs away and ends up in all kinds of trouble. Charley also stirs up some trouble of his own when he begins looking for her. Don't miss out on this book. I loved it!

--Louise Koiner, Texas beta reader



## ...At Liberty to Love

This was one of the best books I have ever read. The characters got so close to your heart you wish they were your family. From the beginning till the end you fell in love with each of them. The two adopted baby boys brought laughs and joy. The love story has strong Christian threads throughout. Highly recommend this book. You will love it.

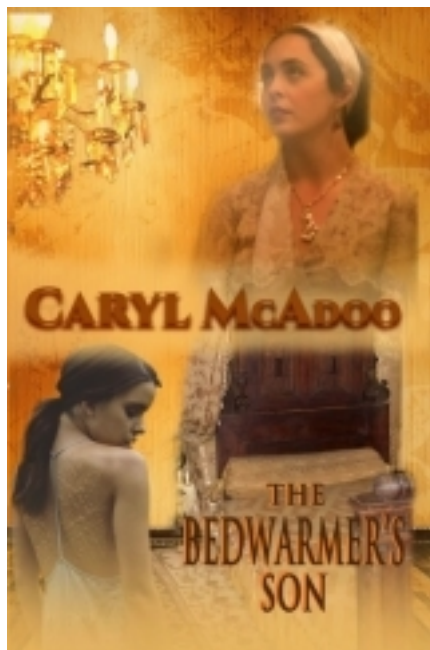
--Jane Moody, reader



## Covering Love

This was one of the best books I have ever read. The characters got so close to your heart you wish they were your family. From the beginning till the end you fell in love with each of them. The two adopted baby boys brought laughs and joy. The love story has strong Christian threads throughout. Highly recommend this book. You will love it.

--Jane Moody, reader



## ...The Bedwarmer's Son

I really loved this book...didn't want to put it down. I love the way it's different than most historical romance novels, and I read many. I loved the way the author used the old man to tell Jasmine's story. I also loved both Wills' stories. Being a Christian novel just made it better. I enjoyed it so much I hated to see it end. This is the first novel I've ever read by this author, but I doubt it will be my last.

-- BJ Robinson, Author of *River Oaks Plantation*, *Siege of Azalea Plantation*, *Azalea Plantation* and others

## Contemporary Red River Romances





...*The Preacher's Faith*

This was my first book to read by Caryl McAdoo and I absolutely loved it. I will be reading more. I love the way she prays that her story gives God Glory and dedicates The Preacher's Faith to Him and His Kingdom...a good clean book to read. I was drawn into this story right from the start. I loved this book and can't wait for book two.

--Elizabeth Dent, Alabama reader



...for *Sing a New Song*

Sing a New Song is a delightful breath of air. Caryl eloquently brings her audience nearer to God [with] fresh ways of viewing



Christian life and all it offers. The characters are loveable and humorous. Illuminating, the story shares the Gospel beautifully. Samuel's sermons as well as the gorgeous lyrics of Mary Esther's songs fill our hearts with newfound worship. Truly an inspiring tale. Christian fiction in its best; a romantic love story that brings its readers closer to God. A treasure for sure.

--Christine Barber, author of *Broken to Pieces*



...for *One and Done*

Faster than a major league outfielder pulling down a popup fly ball, this romance is guaranteed to snag baseball lovers and romance readers alike. Written with wit, verve and Caryl's usual flare for dialect and spicy dialogue, this is no saccharine, man-meets-woman story sanitized romantic fairytale, but so real in the mind, you can almost smell locker room sweat or mouthwatering scent of Mexican food. Identification with the hero and heroine is nearly immediate. With so much to rave about, I cannot begin to cover all the delightful surprises, so the reader simply must buy "One and Done" to see for themselves.

—Cass Wessel, multi-published author of devotions

## Contemporary Apple Orchard Romance



...for *Lady Luck's a Loser*

A very unique, witty plot. I couldn't put it down. I love that my favorite characters are still active at the end of the book, only their relationships have changed. What a way for Dub to fulfill his promises to his deceased wife. Love, trust, forgiveness, and many emotions make for a well written book.

--Joy Gibson, Tennessee

## **The Generations Biblical fiction**



...[A Little Lower Than the](#)

[Angels](#) Caryl McAdoo used her research and knowledge of biblical scripture combined with an incredible imagination as a foundation to fill in the gaps of the story of Adam and Eve and their children. I was caught up in the story from page one to the ending. I particularly appreciated the "Search the Scriptures" section at the end which explains some of the Biblical clues for this work of fiction. I loved it and highly recommend it. --Judy Levine, reader, Arizona



... [Then the Deluge Comes](#)

Deluge is the second book in The Generations Series, and if the books still to follow are as good as this one and the first one in the series are

it is going to be an incredible series. The author has a way of breathing life and emotions into the characters that made me feel like I was on the sidelines watching their stories unfold. This is some of the best Biblical fiction that I have read and I look forward to the rest of the series. I was furnished with an e-copy of the book in return for an honest review.

--Ann Ellison, reader, Texas



.....for **Replenish the Earth**  
Caryl tells the story of the flood in such a unique way.. I like how she makes the characters so real. This Bible story just comes to life. Noah's family on the Ark taking care of the animals and then when they come to a stop, starting all over on a barren earth. I found that the family conversations, their actions and the descriptions just made this more real to me. I like that Caryl gives scripture references and her thoughts at the end of the book.

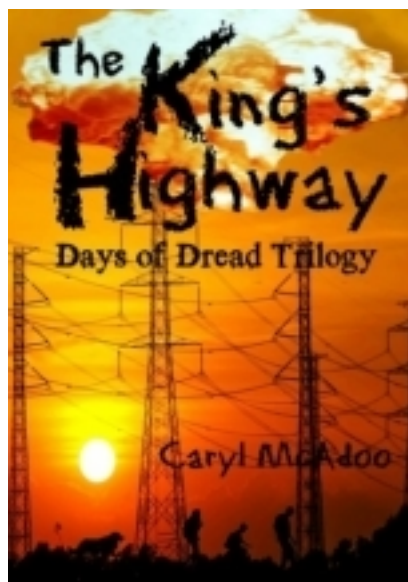
--Deanna Stevens, reader, Nebraska



...for [Children of Eber](#)

So much of the tale remains faithful to the Scriptural account, but where there is silence, Caryl's author voice sings through in delicious detail. For the reader familiar with the Biblical account, she fleshes out a mere paragraph or two until the narrative vibrates with life. As if transported through a time machine, the reader reenters the world of the Ancients experiencing their lives and seeing their surroundings afresh. Those who know the Biblical account will delight in following the ancient pair into Egypt, then back to Canaan again. --Cass Wessel, devotional author

**Mid-Grade that Grandparents love**

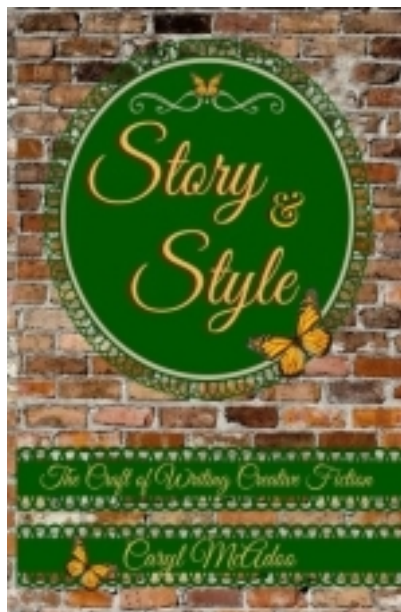


## ... The King's Highway

I can't remember when I have enjoyed reading a book as much as this one. If I really like a book, I can read it in a day. I read this twice in two days. I couldn't quit reading. It has to be right up there with my all-time favorites. If anyone thinks they won't read it because it's for mid-grade, I encourage you to reconsider. You'll miss a blessing. Anyone reading age from the mid grades to senior citizens (that's me) will love this book. The characters in the book are delightful. --

Louise Koiner, reader, Texas

**Non-Fiction**



...*Story & Style, The Craft of Writing Creative Fiction*

This is a wonderful book for those wanting to learn more about writing. I know from experience. The content helped me tremendously!! It especially helped me gain a clear picture of POV and the use of action versus attribution to strengthen my writing and make my debut book the best it can be. Thank you, Caryl, your continued helping hands are a blessing to many of us rookie writers!

--Andy Skrzynski, author of  
*The New World, A Step Backward*



**Coming Soon...**

## Historical Romance

Chief of Sinners, Texas Romance book ten / 2017

Son of Promise, Texas Romance companion / 2018

## Contemporary Romance

The Pitch

King of Texas, starring Patrick Henry Buckmeyer  
III

*Mid-grade & Young Adult*, Grandparents, too!

## Days of Dread Trilogy

### **The Sixth Trumpet book two**

Compelled by a vision, Jackson Allison leaves the safety of Red River County on a quest to free his mother from the clutches of a traitorous double agent. Accompanied by Albert Einstein Hawking, his personal nerd, and the Great Pyrenees guardian, Boggs, the high school freshman must elude Communist patrols, slavers, and bangers.

### **The Kidron Valley book three**

By day, Jackson Allison fights alongside his grandfather, uncles, and other red-neck defenders of the cattle and grain rich Red River County. Plagued by dreams of his dad by night, he somehow joins his father's Marine unit that's fighting the last great battle between good and evil in the Kidron Valley. It seems so real, but how can it be?

## River Bottom Ranch Stories

### ***The Adventures of Sergeant Socks, The Journey Home***

An orphan colt gets lost in a storm and faces many dangers trying to find his way home.

### ***The Adventures of Sergeant Socks, The Bravest Heart***

Sarge is a year older, but is he wiser? He and Uncle Dan are stolen from the rodeo, but what the thieves don't know is that two of the grandsons were hiding in the trailer! Now the boys have to save the horses and the horses have to rescue the boys!

### ***Amazing Graci, Guardian of the River Bottom Goats***

The Great Pyrenees has a job and cannot be sidetracked from protecting the herd of goats. And there's a mangy half coyote running

the river bottoms whose favorite meal is . . . goats!

# The Texas Romance Family Sagas

Book #1 *VOW UNBROKEN*, 1832

Book #2 *HEARTS STOLEN*, 1839-1844

Book #3 *HOPE REBORN*, 1850-1851

Book #4 *SINS OF THE MOTHERS*, 1851-1852

Book #5 *DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART*, 1853-1854

Book #6 *JUST KIN*, 1861-1865

Book #7 *AT LIBERTY TO LOVE* 1865-1866

Book # 8 *COVERING LOVE* 1885-1886

Book #9 *MIGHTY TO SAVE* 1850-60s & 1918-1925

Additional titles planned either in this series or as companion books to the series:

Book #10 *CHIEF OF SINNERS* 1926-1950

*Coming in September, 2017*

## Companion books:

*THE BEDWARMER'S SON* 1857 & 1928- (parallel stories)

*SON OF PROMISE* 1951

*Coming in January, 2018*

# Characters...alphabetically

**Warning ! Reader beware ! Spoiler warning !**

*If you aren't up to date on reading the series, you might find facts you'd rather wait to know.*

## The Baylors

1823 – Andrew Baylor married Susannah Abbott in 1822, then he and brother Jacob are killed in a logging accident, leaving five-year-old Levi Baylor an orphan. Aunt Sue rears him, and later that year, delivers daughter Rebecca Baylor who never knew her daddy.

~ Baylor, LEVI Bartholomew – born November 2, 1817 orphaned at age five; was reared by Aunt Sue Baylor until fourteen, then Uncle Henry Buckmeyer, too, after he married Aunt Sue. Levi became husband to Rosaleen ‘Sassy’ or ‘Rose’ Fogelsong Nightingale Baylor and step-father to Charley Nightingale and Bart Baylor (Comanche Chief Bold Eagle’s blood son); then Pa to Stephen Austin, Daniel Boone, Wallace Rusk, and Rachel Rose. Widowed then marries Sophia in 1885

**HIS TITLE:** HEARTS STOLEN

*On Scene in:* VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, COVERING LOVE

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, and mentioned in contemporary Red River Romance SING A NEW SONG

~ Baylor, Rosaleen ‘ROSE’ (SASSY) Summer Fogelsong Nightingale – born August 24, 1823, married at fifteen in the fall of ’38 to Charles Nightingale, then stolen by the Comanche in the summer of ’39. She lived with the tribe five years as the captive third wife of the chief—birthing Nightingale’s son in February, 1840—until being rescued in October of 1844 by the Texas Rangers. She married Levi mid-December of that same year. She gave birth to Bartholomew, the Comanche chief’s blood son in 1845, followed by Stephen Austin in April, 1846, Daniel Boone in ’49, and Wallace Rusk in ’53. She finally had a baby girl, Rachel Rose.

**HER TITLE:** HEARTS STOLEN

*On Scene in:* HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

*Mention in:* VOW UNBROKEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Baylor, Bartholomew 'BART' – born July 20, 1845 to Rose and Levi, but blood son of Comanche chief Bold Eagle

*On Scene in:* HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, and JUST KIN

*Mention in:* HEARTS STOLEN

~ Baylor, Francine 'FRANCY' Boyd – born October 28, 1842, a California orphan God sends to Jethro to take to Mary Rachel. She quickly becomes a part of the family. Marries Bart Baylor

*On Scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHER, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Baylor, REBECCA Ruth (See FORD)

~ Briggs, BONNIE Claire Buckmeyer – born December 2, 1840. Henry and Sue's fourth child. SEE BRIGGS

*HER TITLE:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, COVERING LOVE

~ Briggs, Clayton 'CLAY' Butterfield – born October 13, 1827 to J.T. and Maud Briggs. He courts and marries Gwendolyn Buckmeyer.

*HIS TITLE:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, GWENDOLYN Belle 'Gwen' Buckmeyer – born Nov. 29, 1834. Henry and Sue's second child. Marries Clay Briggs in 1854.

*HER TITLE:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, COVERING LOVE

~ Briggs, Jake – born in 1812 to J.T and Maud, married to Clover, father of Jedidiah

*On Scene in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Briggs, Jasper – born in 1837 to J.T. and Maud, marries Bonnie Claire Buckmeyer in 1866

*On Scene in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Briggs, Jedidiah – born in October 1845 to Jake and Clover; marries

Lacey Rose Langley Nightingale in 1922  
*On Scene in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN  
MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Briggs, LACEY Rose Langley Longstreet Nightingale born November 16, 1844 in Nacogdoches to Laura, only fourteen when Lacey's father, a Comanche brave, captured her. Lacey marries Harold Longstreet in 1864, is widowed, then marries Charley in November, 1865; Mother to Harold Junior in 1865, Nathaniel in June 1870; widowed again, she marries Jedidiah Briggs in 1922; grandmother to Broderick Eversole "Buddy"

*HER TITLE:* JUST KIN

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, MIGHTY TO SAVE

## **The Buckmeyers**

1832 – Sue meets and marries Henry Buckmeyer.

1833-1844 – Sue gives Henry four daughters, Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire, and a son, Samuel Houston, then leaves him a widower.

1850 – Henry marries May Meriwether.

1851-1854 – May gives Henry a son, David Crockett, and a daughter, Meri Charlotte.

~ Buckmeyer, BONNIE Claire (See BRIGGS)

~ Buckmeyer, CECELIA Carol 'CeCe' (See EVERSOLE)

~ Buckmeyer, DIEDRA Graves – born in September 29, 1868, orphaned at the age of eight and reared by her brother Randal; Marries Crockett Buckmeyer in 1886

*HER TITLE:* COVERING LOVE

~ Buckmeyer, Meri CHARLOTTE (See MORAN)

~ Buckmeyer, David CROCKETT – born October 4, 1851 firstborn of Henry and May. Marries Deidra Graves in 1886

*HIS TITLE:* COVERING LOVE

*On Scene in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN

~ Buckmeyer, GWENDOLYN Belle 'Gwen' (See BRIGGS)

~ Buckmeyer, MARY RACHEL (See RISEN)

~ Buckmeyer, Millicent MAY Meriwether born August 23, 1808 to the Commodore and her mother. A successful New York dime novelist, May heads to Texas to interview a couple of Texas Rangers for new inspiration after seeing a newspaper article about Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. She marries Henry Buckmeyer there and gives birth to David Crockett in 1851 and Charlotte in 1854. MayMee to her grandsugars.

**HER TITLE:** HOPE REBORN

**On Scene in:** SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, COVERING LOVE

**Mention in:** MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Buckmeyer, Patrick HENRY - born March 6, 1798; killed a man at fifteen, fought in the Battle of New Orleans at sixteen. At thirty-four, he married Susannah 'Sue' Baylor in 1832, and became stepfather to her Rebecca—also honorary pa to Levi Baylor—and daddy to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn Belle, Cecelia Carol, and Bonnie Claire before becoming a widower in Dec '44 at his son Houston's birth. Finding love again, he married May Meriwether in 1850 and fathered Crockett and Charlotte. He's Grandpa to a slew of grandsugars with many more to come! Passed November 1885

**HIS TITLE:** VOW UNBROKEN, HOPE REBORN

**On Scene in:** HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, COVERING LOVE

**Mention in:** MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Buckmeyer, Sam HOUSTON – born December 11, 1844. Henry and Sue's fifth child, first son. His mother passes at his birth, so he was motherless until six years old when his pa married May.

**HIS TITLE:** GRAY LADY DOWN, COVERING LOVE

**On Scene in:** HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

**Mention in:** HEARTS STOLEN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Buckmeyer, Susannah 'SUE' Alicia Abbott Baylor – born May 15, 1803, married Andrew Baylor at eighteen in 1821, widowed at nineteen and became guardian aunt to orphaned Levi Baylor, birthed Rebecca in the next year. At twenty-nine, she married Henry Buckmeyer in 1832. Mother to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn, Cecelia, Bonnie Claire, and Samuel Houston.

**HER TITLE:** VOW UNBROKEN

**On Scene in:** HEARTS STOLEN



*Mention in:* HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Dempsey, Frederica ‘FREDDIE’ May’s publisher who Charley turns to for help in New York City on his search for Lacey Rose. She has a widowed daughter, Marah O’Connor, and grandson—Charley’s son with Marah—Leland Charles O’Connor Nightingale

~ Dithers a strange old man who spouts prophesy and seemingly never dies . . . an angel unaware . . . Namrel

~ Eversole, CECELIA Carol ‘CeCe’ Buckmeyer – born April 10, 1836; Henry and Sue’s third child. Marries Elijah Eversole in 1854. Mother to Evelyn May born October 26, 1879; passed 1906 in San Francisco  
*HER TITLE:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, and JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, COVERING LOVE

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Eversole, ELIJAH – born January 2, 1826, moved to California in the gold rush days where his parents abandoned him as a teen. He followed in his father’s blacksmith trade and loves inventing and building new helpful machines. Jethro Risen and Moses Jones make him a partner in a gold mine. He marries Cecelia Buckmeyer in 1854. Father to Evelyn May born October 26, 1879; passed 1906 in San Francisco earthquake

*HIS TITLE:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

*On Scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, COVERING LOVE

*Mention in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Eversole, EVELYN “EVIE” May - See Evelyn Nightingale

~ Ford, Julia and Michele, Marcus’ first wife and daughter, died on the yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans

*Mention in:* AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Ford, MARCUS Aurelius, Major in the Civil War with Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk under General Buckmeyer. Lost his first wife Julia and baby Michele to yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans. Meets the Widow Rusk in 1865; marries her in 1866 and adopts her two adopted sons, becoming father to Michael and Gabriel Ford.

*HIS TITLE:* AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Ford, MICHAEL - exact day of birth unknown, about four years old in November 1865. He and brother Gabriel were adopted by Rebecca Rusk then by her husband Marcus Ford.

*On Scene in:* AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Ford, REBECCA Ruth Baylor Rusk – born June 12, 1823; Sue's daughter by 1st husband Andrew (who died before Rebecca's birth). The nine-year-old on the Jefferson Trace in 1832 (book 1) turns twenty-one in 1844 (book 2) before finally meeting Wallace Rusk. Marries him at age twenty-seven in 1850, then is widowed in 1864. Adopted two boys, Michael and Gabriel in 1866 then married Marcus Ford when she's forty-two.

*HER TITLE:* AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

*On Scene in:* VOW UNBROKEN, HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, COVERING LOVE

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Graves, BECCA Joy Risen – born to Mary Rachel Buckmeyer Risen and Jethro (blood daughter of Clinton) April 10, 1853, ran off and went North, met and married Randal Ramsey Graves in 1880, Mother to Zacharias "Bubba" in March 1884

*On Scene in:* COVERING LOVE

~ Graves, DIEDRA (See BUCKMEYER)– born in September 29, 1868, orphaned at the age of eight and reared by her brother Randal

*HER TITLE:* COVERING LOVE

~ Graves, RANDAL Ramsey, born in 1850, took in orphaned eight-year-old sister at twenty-six, Marries Recca Risen in 1880, Father to Zacharias 'Bubba' Graves born March 1884

*On Scene in:* COVERING LOVE

~ Graves, Zacharias 'ZACH' or 'BUBBA' Randal – born to Randal and Becca Risen Graves March 6, 1884

*On Scene in:* COVERING LOVE

~ Harris, John Robert – deceased; husband to Judith; father to Jules

*Mention in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Harris, JOHN Robert II – born October 2, 1896 to John Jacob and Alma Harris, grandson of Jules and Pearl Harris

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Harris, Judith Hightower – daughter of Carter; wife to John Robert

Harris; mother of Jules  
*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Harris, JULES – born 1847, son of John and Judith Harris on the Live Oaks Plantation in the Cypress Springs community in Texas, father to John Jacob

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

HIS TITLE: MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Harris, PEARL – born around 1849 to a white woman in New Orleans, sold to Live Oaks in 1852, reared by Big Jim and Mammy, married Jules Harris in 1869, mother to John Jacob, grandmother to John Robert II

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

Her TITLE: MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Harris, PRETTY - born February 12, 1849 on a Virginia farm to Big Jim and Mammy, owned by the Harris family. Moved to Live Oaks in Texas with her parents when John Harris married Judith Hightower and took his slaves with him

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Hightower, Carter – father of Judith; father-in-law of John Harris III; grandfather to Jules

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Hightower, POPPY – born 1861 to Pretty Harris, Poppy is also known by Auntie Sweetie Pie by Jules

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Longstreet, Harold Junior – born to Lacey (widowed before his birth), reared by Charley Nightingale, older half-brother to Nathaniel

*Mention:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Jeffcoat, CLAUDIA, a wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances who befriended and helped Charley on his search for Lacey Rose. Pauleen Shriver's sister.

*Mention in:* JUST KIN

~ Jones, LANELLE Wheeler – born February 26, 1831, Caleb's cousin, John's sister, marries Moses Jones in early fall 1851.

*On scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

*Mention in:* AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Jones, MOSES – born October 13, 1816, a Scot partnered with Jethro Risen in a gold mine, marries Lanelle Wheeler in 1854.

*On scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

*Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Jones, 'JOSH'ua Jethro, also 'JONESY' – born January 19, 1852 to Moses and Lanelle, but the blood son of Caleb Wheeler

~ Langley, LACEY Rose Langley (See BRIGGS)

~ Langley, LAURA (See ROZIER)

~ Longstreet, Harold Sr. – gambler, Married Lacey Rose in 1864; murdered in 1864 (random attack)

*On scene in:* JUST KIN

~ Longstreet, Harold Jr. 'H.J.' – born in 1865 to widowed Lacey Rose Langley Longstreet, reared by Charley Nightingale and Lacey

*Mentioned in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Meriwether, CHESTER born a slave on October 7, 1803 to Commodore Meriwether's field hands Silas and Honey Pie. He was 5, about to be 6, when his half-sister Millicent May was born. He marries JEWEL (formerly Mammy, the Buckmeyers' cook) in 1851.

*On Scene in:* HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Meriwether, JEWEL (formerly Mammy) Rozier the Buckmeyers' cook after Henry rescued her and her son Jean Paul Rozier who also works for the Buckmeyers.

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, JUST KIN, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Meriwether, Silas born a slave in 1808 on the Meriwethers' Sea Side plantation, father of Chester and also blood father of May

*Mention in:* HOPE REBORN

~ Moran, Meri 'CHARLOTTE' Buckmeyer born in December 2, 1854 to Henry and May. Marries Nash Moran in 1886

*HER TITLE:* COVERING LOVE

*On Scene in:* JUST KIN

~ Moran, NASH – New York business partner of Crockett Buckmeyer,

marries Charlotte Buckmeyer in 1886

*HIS TITLE:* COVERING LOVE

~ Nightingale, Broderick 'BUDDY' Eversole – born November 11, 1914 to Nathaniel and Evelyn

*HIS TITLE:* CHIEF OF SINNERS

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Nightingale, CHARLES Nathaniel, Senior - born 1805, married Rosaleen Fogelsong and fathered Charley, though was never around him. Lives in St. Louis with his first wife and two daughters.

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN

~ Nightingale, Charles 'CHARLEY' Nathaniel - born son to a Comanche chief Feb 27 '40 to the captive third wife Rosaleen, but Charles Nightingale was his mother's husband and Charley's blood father. He's rescued in 1844 with his mother by Texas Rangers Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. He killed a man at ten when Comancheros came to steal him and his mother to return them to Bold Eagle. He marries Lacey Rose Langley in November, 1865.

*HIS TITLE:* JUST KIN

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, COVERING LOVE

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, COVERING LOVE, MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Nightingale, EVELYN "EVIE" May Eversole – born October 26, 1879 to Elijah and Cecelia Eversole, married Nathaniel Levi Nightingale in the Fall 1897. Mother to Millicent May in 1910 (lived only hours), Broderick 'Buddy' Eversole Nightingale in 1914, and Cecelia Rose in 1924; passed fall 1924 with ectopic pregnancy

*HER TITLES:* COVERING LOVE, MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Nightingale, LACEY Rose Langley – see Lacey Briggs

~ Nightingale, Millicent 'MILLY' May – born 1910, only lived a few hours

*Mention in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Nightingale, NATHANIEL Levi – born June 28, 1870 to Charley and Lacey Rose; marries Evelyn Eversole in fall 1897; Father to Millicent May in 1910 (lived only hours), Broderick 'Buddy' Eversole Nightingale in 1914, and Cecelia Rose in 1924; widowed in 1924 when Evelyn passed

*HIS TITLES:* COVERING LOVE, MIGHTY TO SAVE

*On Scene in:* CHIEF OF SINNERS

~ O'Connor, Leland Charles – surprise illegitimate son of Charley Nightingale and Marah O'Connor, conceived while on his search for Lacey, born unknown to Charley, in the fall of 1866; in 1877, showed up in Clarksville when Nathaniel was seven

*Mention in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ O'Connor, Curry CYLE, Junior Marah' fourteen year old son

*Mention in:* JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, CURRY Cyle, Senior Marah's dead husband

*Mention in:* JUST KIN

~ O'Connor, MARAH A beautiful older woman (twenty-nine) who almost wins Charley's heart. She breeds thoroughbreds in Connecticut and is the daughter of Freddie – May's publisher who helped Charley in New York

*On Scene in:* JUST KIN

*Mention in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Risen, BECCA Joy – See Becca Graves

~ Risen, JETHRO – born September 22, 1830 partner of Moses Jones in a gold mine. Married Mary Rachel Buckmeyer Wheeler in 1853 and later that year, reconnected with his estranged father, Boaz. Founds the Mercy House Orphanage and Miners' Bank in San Francisco.

*HIS TITLE:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

*On Scene in:* AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, Covering Love

*Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Risen, MARY RACHEL Buckmeyer Wheeler – born August 3, 1833. Henry and Sue's firstborn eloped with Caleb Wheeler in 1851 without Daddy's blessing and moved to San Francisco where she took over the renamed Lone Star Mercantile. Her husband soon murdered, she becomes the widowed mother of Susannah "SUSIE" Wheeler. Remarries Jethro Risen in 1853, adopted an orphan, Francine "FRANCY" and birthed baby girl Rebecca "BECCA" in April, 1853 (blood daughter of Clinton) and Boaz Reuel, Jethro's firstborn son, in December, 1854.

*HER TITLE:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN

*DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE, COVERING LOVE*

~ Rozier, JEAN PAUL son of the Buckmeyer's cook, Mammy or later, Jewel. He and his mother were freed by their former owner when he died and both went to work for Henry. Her in the kitchen, him supervising the cotton fields. He marries Laura Langley, another soul Henry took in.

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

*Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Rozier, LAURA Langley was rescued at fifteen in 1844 along with Sassy. Pregnant at the time, she delivered the next month—a baby girl, Lacey Rose on the way to the Buckmeyers' for Thanksgiving that same year. She stays on there as teacher and marries Jean Paul Rozier.

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

*Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART

~ Rusk, WALLACE – born August 15, 1819, a sixteen-year-old orphan picked up by Henry Buckmeyer and young Levi Baylor on the way to the Battle of San Jacinto, served with Levi Texas Rangering, fell in love with his sister Rebecca sight-unseen. After six years of proposing, marries her in 1850. Fatally wounded in the Civil War, he dies from stubbornness. No children, but Lacey Rose Langley Nightingale was named after him.

*On Scene in:* HEARTS STOLEN, HOPE REBORN, JUST KIN

*Mention in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE

~ Shriver, Pauleen a Wealthy married woman and avid reader of dime romances, befriended Charley on his search for Lacey

*Mention in:* JUST KIN

~ Wheeler, Caleb – born August 29, 1828, cousin to John and Lanelle, partners in the Mercantile in San Francisco after eloping with Mary Rachel Buckmeyer in 1851, father of Susannah.

*On Scene in:* HOPE REBORN, SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ Wheeler, John – born April 17, 1825, Lanelle's brother, Caleb's cousin, partner in San Francisco Mercantile.

*On Scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHER

~ Wheeler, Susannah "SUSIE" – born October, 1851 in San Francisco to Mary Rachel (father Caleb deceased)

*On Scene in:* SINS OF THE MOTHERS

*Mention in:* DAUGHTERS OF THE HEART, AT LIBERTY TO LOVE,  
COVERING LOVE

~ Worthington, Jeremiah – Ruth's brother, attorney who helped Jules  
in his efforts to regain ownership from his cruel grandfather

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE

~ Worthington, Ruth – Jeremiah's sister who bought Pearl, saving her  
from the vile man bidding on her. She lived in Austin, Texas

*On Scene in:* MIGHTY TO SAVE



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